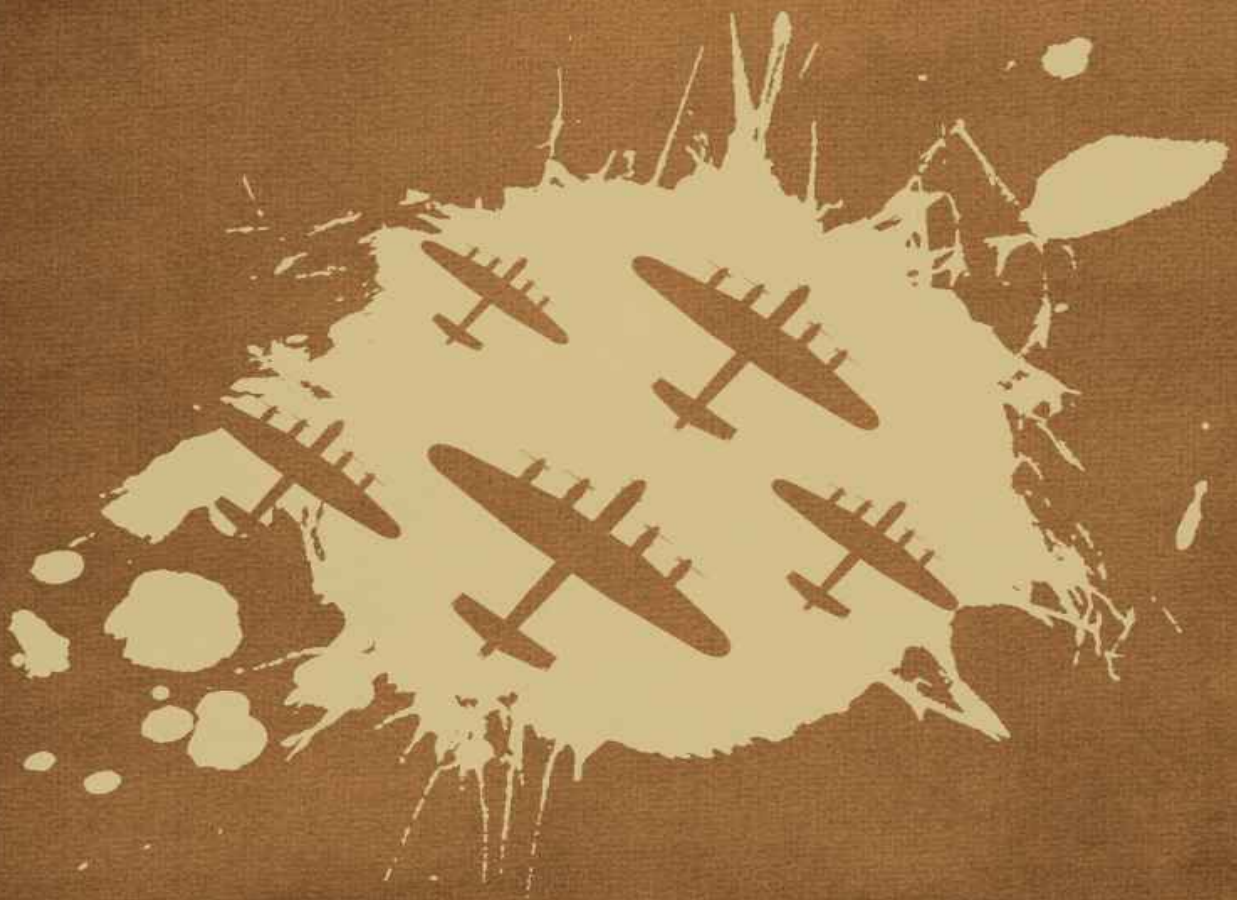
MRS. BRADLEY SERIES

BRAZEN TONGUE



GLADYS MITCHELL

BRAZEN TONGUE

Titles by Gladys Mitchell

Speedy Death (1929)
The Mystery of a Butcher's Shop (1930)
The Longer Bodies (1930)
The Saltmarsh Murders (1932)
Death at the Opera (1934)
The Devil at Saxon Wall (1935)
Dead Men's Morris (1936)
Come Away, Death (1937)
St Peter's Finger (1938)
Printer's Error (1939)
Brazen Tongue (1940)
Hangman's Curfew (1941)
When Last I Died (1941)
Laurels are Poison (1942)
Sunset over Soho (1943)
The Worsted Viper (1943)
My Father Sleeps (1944)
The Rising of the Moon (1945)
Here Comes a Chopper (1946)
Death and the Maiden (1947)
The Dancing Druids (1948)
Tom Brown's Body (1949)
Groaning Spinney (1950)
The Devil's Elbow (1951)
The Echoing Strangers (1952)
Merlin's Furlong (1953)
Faintley Speaking (1954)
On Your Marks (1954)
Watson's Choice (1955)
Twelve Horses and the Hangman's Noose (1956)

The Twenty-Third Man (1957)
Spotted Hemlock (1958)
The Man Who Grew Tomatoes (1959)
Say it With Flowers (1960)
The Nodding Canaries (1961)
My Bones Will Keep (1962)
Adders on the Heath (1963)
Death of a Delft Blue (1964)
Pageant of Murder (1965)
The Croaking Raven(1966)
Skeleton Island (1967)
Three Quick and Five Dead (1968)
Dance to your Daddy (1969)
Gory Dew (1970)
Lament For Leto (1971)
A Hearse on May-Day (1972)
The Murder of Busy Lizzie (1973)
A Javelin for Jonah (1974)
Winking at the Brim (1974)
Convent on Styx (1975)
Late, Late in the Evening (1976)
Noonday and Night (1977)
Fault in the Structure (1977)
Wraiths and Changelings (1978)
Mingled With Venom (1978)
Nest of Vipers (1979)
The Mudflats of the Dead (1979)
Uncoffin'd Clay (1980)
The Whispering Knights (1980)
The Death-Cap Dancers (1981)
Lovers Make Moan (1981)
Here Lies Gloria Mundy (1982)
Death of a Burrowing Mole (1982)
The Greenstone Griffins (1983)
Cold, Lone and Still (1983)
No Winding Sheet (1984)
The Crozier Pharaohs (1984)

Gladys Mitchell writing as Malcolm Torrie

Heavy as Lead (1966)
Late and Cold (1967)
Your Secret Friend (1968)
Shades of Darkness (1970)
Bismarck Herrings (1971)

BRAZEN TONGUE

GLADYS MITCHELL

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The text of this book has been preserved from the original British edition and includes British vocabulary, grammar, style, and punctuation, some of which may differ from modern publishing practices. Every care has been taken to preserve the author’s tone and meaning, with only minimal changes to punctuation and wording to ensure a fluent experience for modern readers.

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• CHAPTER 1 •

Group of Little Bacchanals (in Porcelain, by L. F. Roubiliac).
Title of a piece signed and dated.

The vast galvanised iron cistern which had been deposited at some time during the second week of September in a side street opposite the Postmen's Office had fascinated Lionel Frank Percy, aged ten, from the moment he had first set eyes on it, and for several successive days he and his friends had given each other a leg up so that each in turn could obtain a bird's-eye view of the empty interior.

The boys regarded it as their special plaything, beat a tattoo upon its resounding sides, and even, on one ecstatically interesting morning, stole Lionel's host's step-ladder—the boys had been sent from a London school to Willington—transported it deviously, by way of a back alley, to the side of the tank, climbed up, and took turns in walking across the three iron girders (further sources of conjecture and argument) which spanned the gigantic receptacle from side to side.

About a fortnight after the cistern had been deposited, the boys, visiting it one morning, were astonished to find that it had been filled with water and that the top had been covered with planks.

"If we took them bits of wood off, we could swim in there," observed Lionel, who, at the moment of speaking, was leaning on his stomach over the boards, peering downwards at the heavy, oily water.

"Shove one, and see if it moves," suggested his friends. Lionel obliged by giving one of the planks to his right a hearty push.

"It moves all right," he announced. The others had seen this, clearly enough, from below.

"All we wants," said a budding engineer, "is a good big stick or something."

“Brooms,” said a bright-eyed child of eight and a half. So they returned to their respective foster-homes, and, by methods known to their type, age, and sex, contrived to obtain possession of two brooms, a long-handled mop, and a hoe.

It was the smallest child who first noticed the tall, thin young man standing on the opposite side of the road, and, having glanced at him, he nudged his neighbour earnestly.

“Cops,” he observed. The magic word took instantaneous and miraculous effect. In no time the street was deserted except for the tall young man, the cistern, and a stray cat which had ambled up at the instant that the lads had disappeared. The young man took off his steel helmet, approached the cistern, and peered over into its depths. Apparently satisfied that the receptacle and its murky contents had sustained no damage, he walked away again. It did not occur to him, it seemed, to replace the planks which the boys had disarranged, and the letters on his helmet were U.D.C.

Under the arch of the railway bridge, some half-mile from the scene of the exploit, Lionel Francis Percy demanded of the others, who, like himself, were squatting on their heels against the wall:

“How long he bin there, do you think?”

“Hours. He bin watching us all the time,” replied the child who had first noticed the young man.

“Good thing it wasn’t Mr. Allen. He knows my new dad,” observed another of the boys.

“He’d have to give our name and address at the police station if he knowed them,” said the boy with the hoe, “but I reckon he was only a Special.”

“I left my new mum’s broom there. She won’t half pay me,” said the fourth member of the band. “Think I better go back?”

“Go back down Green Dragon, Billy,” suggested Lionel. “He won’t expect you that way. You can sneak over Burton’s back wall. Old Ma Burton goes out to work, so nobody won’t cop you.”

Billy weighed up the risks of his foster-mother’s and the special constable’s wraths, respectively, and decided that, while it was more than possible that the special constable might no longer be on guard over the cistern, it was most improbable that his mother would fail to notice that her broom had disappeared. At the moment she was out shopping, but there seemed little doubt of her ultimate return.

He took the advice of his leader, returned by devious ways to the cistern, and, to his immense relief, saw that the young man had departed, but that the broom was where he himself had dropped it. He picked it up, and took the precaution of returning it to the scullery before he rejoined the others. These, with patient kindness, had waited half an hour for him. The planks, he reported, were still in a state of disarray.

"Think we ought to put 'em back?" Lionel enquired, a little doubtfully.

"That old Special 'ud only think we was mucking about," said Billy. This was the general view, but it was not acceptable to Lionel.

"He won't come back yet. He's on a beat. We could have a swim," he said. "Two go in at a time, and the other two watch out. There's only two streets he could come by, even if he did come back, and I bet he won't. Come on. Who says a swim?"

"Too cold," said the third child, a green-eyed furtive-looking boy. His baptismal name was Arthur, but to his associates he was usually known, by reason of the physical defect of an exceptionally bad squint, as Bosso. The eight-and-a-half-year-old said nothing, as his opinion had not been asked for, and, in any case, he could not swim.

Billy sided with Bosso. At this, Lionel, who saw himself losing his authority, appealed to the youngest child. The child, who had the makings of a politician, replied cautiously that he was willing to hold anybody's clothes.

At this, Lionel hinted that he was prepared to swim alone. Billy dared him. Bosso said nothing, but he sniffed in a marked manner, and directed at Lionel such a ferocious squint out of an already 'naturally swivelled optic' (as his elder brother had termed it, apologetically, to his young lady) that his sensitive friend, after asking him what he thought he was bossing at, reaffirmed his determination to swim in the cistern or perish.

The youngest member again offered to hold his clothes. Billy and Bosso each "kept" a street. The hero took off his jacket slowly, two pullovers (whose holes, fortunately, did not coincide) rather more slowly, his boots, socks, and shorts very rapidly, and his shirt like a flash. Then, having unwound a choking scarf, he requested the clothes-horse to give him a bunk up.

The sturdy eight-year-old complied to the best of his ability. Lionel's honour and prestige were at stake. He stood poised on one of the iron

girders and looked uncertainly at the water which was less than nine inches below his grimy little heels. The day was calm, but the mid-September air was undeniably chilly.

"Go on in. We're all looking at you," said the clothes-laden watcher encouragingly.

"Yes, and what price that blue-nosed cop?" said Lionel, realising, too late, the dangers and complications of the course to which he had committed himself.

"Him? You said yourself he wouldn't come back," said Billy.

"Why, he never even chased us," said Bosso.

"No, he never, did he?" said Lionel, taking heart from this. "Watch out, you silly fools," he added, from his perch, to his obviously interested friends, both of whom had abandoned their posts and were drawing near to see the fun. Billy and Bosso, however, had no intention whatever of missing the entertainment, and made no attempt to obey him. The conclusion to the affair justified their instinctive desire for excitement, and, in fact, proved rich beyond their dreams.

With a further demand for sentries which was entirely disregarded by his followers, Lionel, bracing himself, prepared to drop into the depths. The water had been provided by the Urban District Council for the use of its fire-fighting units in the event of air-raids, and had become, through exposure, blackened and very dirty. It was impossible now to see the bottom of the cistern.

Lionel went down like a plummet, but in an instant his head bobbed up again. He scrabbled at one of the overhead bars of iron and clutched it tightly. Then, heaving up his legs, he clung there like a monkey on a stick.

"Get me out! Get me out! I trod on a deader!" he shrieked.

• CHAPTER 2 •

The Mystery of Mr. E. Drood: an adaptation by Orpheus C. Kerr.
Printed on the wrapper of the English edition.

Willington, in the early days of the war, was as patriotically "blacked-out" as any town in England. On the evening preceding the day on which the body had been found by Lionel in the A.R.P. tank at the western end of the town, a young couple had gone to the cinema in the Broadway, the town's metropolis. When the programme was over, they found the change, from the comparatively brightly lighted staircase and vestibule of the cinema to the black-out of the rainy streets, dismaying and disconcerting.

"Goodness knows whether it's any good waiting for a bus," said Sidney.

"And me with my wave," said Mabel.

"All right. Let's shove in under here, then. Better than standing in the wet."

"Glad I got you with me. Can't say I see myself standing under dark doorways in the black-out all on my lonesome. Never know who you might be rubbing shoulders with." She had scarcely finished the sentence when she gave a slight exclamation and clutched Sidney's arm.

"What's up now?" he enquired.

"Somebody in here already. (Beg your pardon, I'm sure.) Sidney, where's your torch?"

"Battery run out, and they say they can't replace it, not at present."

"Like to be awkward, some of those people in shops."

"Oh, I don't know. Transport, that's what it is."

"How often do these buses run at nights?"

"Irregular service. You take pot-luck after seven."

"Makes you wonder if the pictures are worth it or not." She drew a little nearer to him in the darkness. He put his arm around her, regardless of

their wet coats, but the reason for her restlessness—nervous fears, not love—did not communicate itself to him.

"Don't make me wonder. What about it, Mabel? What do you say?" he demanded, a lover's eagerness in his rough, young voice, as he held her a little more tightly.

"Not if they make you join up. I don't want to be no war widow."

"That's right. Cheer a bloke up." He laughed, and added, to the now shadowy figure beside them in the doorway (for their eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness), "Excuse me, mate, but how long you been waiting for the bus?"

The stranger did not reply, and Mabel, in a low tone, but audibly, chided her swain for tactlessness.

"It isn't everyone that's waiting to get on something. Mind your own business, Sidney."

The young man, slightly embarrassed, stepped out into the rain to see whether there was any sign of the bus. His sweetheart, regardless of her hair, which had been waved with heated tongs by her special girl at her special shop less than four hours previously, and had to last for the next three weeks, immediately stepped out and joined him.

"Sidney," she said urgently, "Let's walk. I'm getting the creeps along of him."

"Oh, I don't know. Coming on faster than it was." He fastened his turned-up collar. "We can't help it if people don't want to be matey. Come on back. There's sure to be a bus in a minute."

"Well, you stand next to him, then."

"Hasn't been behaving funny, has he? Because if he has…"

"Never moved an inch. It isn't that. If he acted fresh, or even nasty, I think I'd feel more comfortable. You don't think perhaps he's been tooken ill?"

"I'll ask him. Shouldn't know what to do, though, if he has."

"Get him inside the pictures. They'll look after him. Got to have trained first aid because of air-raids."

"All right, then. Come on back. No good us getting drenched."

So they returned to their cover from the rain, and Sidney, enquiring after the health of the stranger, received no reply, and Mabel hunched first one hip and then the other in an effort to relieve fatigue. Sidney and the

stranger stood motionless, until Sidney began to explore his pockets for matches and a cigarette.

At this Mabel said suddenly, “Come on, Sidney. I’m going to walk.”

“What, now we’ve waited so long?” He dropped his voice and added, “I think he’s pretty screwed, but you don’t want to worry.”

“I’d sooner go. Come on. We won’t get very wet if we step it out.”

“Oh, but the bus is sure to be along in a minute. It’s a goodish way, you know.”

“Got your best suit on, or something?” He laughed again, and put his arm round her shoulders. To his surprise (but not to his discomfiture, for he was a philosophical young man whose reaction to the vagaries of the sex was that you had to take women as you found them) this time she shrugged herself away. He dropped his arm to his side, and, in doing so, somehow contrived to strike (but not at all heavily), the stiff and silent stranger. Without the slightest sound, except that occasioned by the fall, the man tumbled flat on his face across the dirty pavement.

Sidney’s exclamation of surprise was drowned in a shriek from Mabel.

“Here, hold hard, Mabel,” said Sidney. “Looks as if you was right, and the poor bloke’s ill.” He thrust back into his pocket the cigarette case he had taken out, and stooped down to grope for and find the stranger’s prostrate, inert and oddly rigid body.

“Don’t touch him! It might be catching,” said Mabel, half hysterically. “Wish you’d got a torch. Shall I yell police?”

“Better not. If we want one, better get him quietly. Let’s get this bloke into the pictures. I’ve got him under the arms. Stand clear while I try and get him up.” He struggled to lift the unconscious man, but was compelled to add, “No good. I can’t shift him by myself. He’s ever so heavy. Will you stay here with him, or would you sooner go and get the commissionaire or look for a policeman?”

He was still crouched on his heels beside the stranger. When he spoke next his voice had an uncomfortable catch in it.

“Tell you what, old girl. He’s bloomin’ cold!”

• CHAPTER 3 •

Moonlight: a landscape with buildings and figures.
Title of a painting by Francis Oliver Finch.

The moon was due to rise at 11.57 p.m. At 9.55, therefore, at just about the time that Sidney and Mabel were bending over the body, the rainy night was as black as stringent regulations and the A.R.P. wardens could make it.

"Town Hall," said the conductor. Sally Lestrange peered out from a faintly-lighted omnibus, decided that she was as near to her destination as the bus would be likely to take her, and descended hastily as the bus began to move off—this to the irritation of the conductor, who informed her that he had already suffered from two nervous breakdowns that day, and had a wife and family to consider. Sally grinned, and was immediately lost to his sight.

The pavement was wide, and she walked uncertainly north and a point by east in an endeavour to locate the narrow alley which led by the side of one of the looming buildings to the Control Room of the local Report Centre.

She hit, more by luck than judgment, upon the right turning, and found that a white line on the ground gave reasonable guidance to a dark doorway upon which was a thick white arrow.

Sally, who had visited the place in daylight, stepped carefully up two wet, slippery steps which had not been whitened, and pushed open a door. A shaft of light pierced the night like a sword, and showed the slanting rain. An instant later Sally was inside, and the door had shut itself behind her.

"You'll have to trap that light, you know, Simmonds," was her characteristic briskly-spoken remark to her cousin Ferdinand's valet, who acted as one of the Control Room messengers.

"Good evening, Miss Sally. Yes, you're right. There had ought to be a curtain." He released it, and it hung, like the horsehides of our remote cave-

dwelling ancestors, heavily across the doorway. “You’re prompt on duty, Miss.”

“Why, how’s the time?” She glanced at her watch. “Where do I sign on?”

“Next room, Miss Sally. You’ll find Sir Ferdinand in there. He’s one of the plotting officers to-night.”

“Bit of luck for me,” observed Sally, pushing open a second swing door and making her way past a group of gossiping men to a square table in the centre of a large square room. “Oh hullo, Bertie,” she continued. “Where do I sign on?”

“Good heavens, Sally! What the devil do you think you’re doing here?”

Ferdinand Lestrange, Mrs. Bradley’s son by her first husband, put up his eyeglass and studied his cousin closely.

“Telephonist,” Sally replied. “It’s all right. Mother approves. She’s an air raid warden herself.”

“Good God!” said Sir Ferdinand. “Sign the book here, my child. You are on the twenty-two hours shift.”

“Eight hours, I thought, darling. I’m due home to breakfast to-morrow morning.”

“Yes. We use the twenty-four-hour clock. How is Aunt Selina?”

“Oh, mother’s fine. She loves going round and knocking up all the people in the village and telling them to cover up lights. She’s passed her anti-gas stuff, too, and I believe she sleeps in her tin hat. But, Bertie, where do I go now?”

Ferdinand smiled slightly.

“Through that next door,” he said. He sat down at a table on which stood four telephones on a green baize cloth, and picked up his brief-case. It was his view that the night was a good time to work. He often worked until five or six in the morning, then went to bed for two hours, and after breakfast and a brisk walk was ready in court for all comers.

His young cousin, although her experiences included dancing all night and breakfasting off ham and eggs in a garishly-decorated basement or on sandwiches at a coffee stall, was not as much accustomed to missing sleep. She looked about her, when she had passed through the door which divided the supervisors’ and plotting officers’ room from that used by the telephonists, with undisguised and most unflattering horror.

The two o'clock shift were in hats, coats, gloves, and gas masks, ready to depart. Some of the ten o'clock shift, like Sally herself, had arrived a few minutes before time, and several of the outgoing people, in consequence, were watching the clock, preparing to leave the moment the hands reached the hour.

The atmosphere of the narrow, gas-proof chamber was hot and close. There was no heating laid on. The room derived its warmth from the bodies and breath of its denizens. It was occupied by at least a dozen people every hour of the twenty-four.

"If you don't mind the lights switched off, we can have a spot of fresh air," said a tall red-haired girl in navy-blue slacks and sweater. She put out the two extremely powerful lamps as she spoke, and then opened the door which led to a building at the back of the Control Room. This building was about thirty yards away, and a covered-topped passage, open at both sides, led to its unlighted door.

The red-haired girl swung the door of the Control Room slowly backwards and forwards, fanning great draughts of cold fresh air into the unwholesome little dungeon.

"Twenty-two hours," said a voice. "Time for the next shift. And it ain't half raining, girls." The red-haired girl shut the door, somebody else switched the lights on again, and Sally, who had moved to be out of the draught, sat down on a plush-covered, tubular steel chair.

"Any tests to-night?" asked a girl in spectacles.

"Half-past ten. In-telephones only. At least, you'll get the messages for the Outs, but not to be transmitted," replied the red-haired girl.

"Gets us used to the men's handwriting, I suppose," suggested an extremely thin girl in a woollen suit. She took out her knitting, an example followed by most of the company.

Sally took out a detective story, and settled herself to read. The book was not an enthralling one, however, and she wondered, not for the first time, why the masters of the craft did not produce their detective stories a good deal more frequently than was their custom. A lazy lot, she considered them, and probably indecently opulent, so that they had no need to bestir themselves more than about once in six months for the benefit of their public.

The consideration of their wealth led to reflections upon her own indigence and she was deeply involved in the working-out of a scheme

whereby she could get her mother to let her have her next quarter's allowance two months in advance when a small untidily-moustached man, strangely reminiscent, but in the most unflattering sense, of photographs she had seen of Arnold Bennett, appeared in the Control Room doorway.

"Any for tea?" he announced, rather than enquired, in a hoarse, conspiratorial voice. "Oh, and there's a note next door for Miss Mort. Is she 'ere?"

"Coffee, Budge," said the red-haired girl sternly. "No, she isn't here. I shouldn't think she's coming. She's always on time."

"I suppose you can't make it China, Budge?" said the girl in spectacles.

"What's the matter with beer?" said the girl in the knitted suit. The messenger patiently repeated his first wheezy assertion, and, receiving, this time, an encouraging chorus of groans, departed.

"I had three cocktails before I came out," said the red-haired girl. "And to think it's not really my shift! This place is hell, anyway."

It seemed a very short time after the cups of tea had been drunk and the crockery collected before the missing reporter turned up, but, as somebody mentioned the note, the first telephone rang, inaugurating the usual practice with the wardens, and for nearly an hour and a half the telephonists were kept busy. Dozens of reports of air-raid damage, casualties, and fires came in from the various wardens' posts in the district. The In-telephonists took down the messages, the plotting officers made out the necessary instruction slips for the Out-telephonists, and everyone in the building was extremely busy. Gradually, however, the reports became more and more light-hearted.

'*Bunch of Grapes' almost totally demolished. No survivors. Two barrels of beer salvaged. Please instruct*, said one, which came to Sally; and later, with a grin and a shiver, she handed over to the Recorders: *Cottage Hospital. One deceased casualty. Please collect.*

"Wardens are getting fed-up. They'll soon knock off now, I should think," said the girl in the knitted suit.

"About time, too, considering we've apparently sent out the whole of the fire-fighting units three times in eight minutes already," said the red-haired girl, making up her lips.

At midnight, except for one or two calls from wardens who seemed in no hurry to go home and go to bed, the exercises ceased. The telephonists

relaxed, took up their knitting again, ate sandwiches, chocolate, and apples, laughed, smoked, and chatted. One or two went into the next room to play cards with the men.

By this time Sally had managed to separate the permanent paid from the temporary volunteer staff. There were six of each present that evening. The red-haired girl, the girl in spectacles, the girl in the knitted suit, two others in slacks, and another, somewhat older woman, in tweeds, were all permanent. Of the volunteers, who undertook the work once a fortnight on a rota, four were teachers, the fifth (who had come in late) was a reporter on the local paper, and the sixth was Sally herself. She and the young reporter, whom she had met at one of her mother's charitable functions, gravitated towards one another, and began to talk in low tones.

At about half-past twelve two of the girls, after a short conference, took down the torch labelled 'For Emergency Only' and went out by the back door over to the next building.

"Auntie," said the reporter, in response to a question from Sally. "We generally go across in couples." She settled herself with her back against the table on which was the private telephone connecting the local Report Centre with the main centre for the district, put her feet up, picked up a copy of the great daily newspaper whose editorial chair she desired, one day, to occupy, and pursued her usual evening amusement of recasting the policy of the paper and then of re-writing the leading article.

A few minutes later the two girls who had gone outside came back again, reporting that the rain had stopped. The one who was holding it replaced the torch, and both settled themselves uncomfortably on chairs and closed their eyes. Sally felt wide awake. She picked up her book again, but rejected it after five minutes. She looked at the clock, glanced round at her silent companions, and was suddenly reminded, for no particular reason, of the note for the reporter. She leaned over and mentioned that she had heard it was in the next room. The reporter muttered, sleepily, that she supposed it was from her editor and couldn't matter much. Sally closed her eyes. Slowly the hands of the clock crawled round to a quarter to one, twelve minutes to one, ten past one, and then…she must have dozed, she thought… twenty-five past one.

Dispirited, she took out a cigarette, lighted it and smoked it slowly, reflecting that it was probably very selfish to smoke at all in a gas-proof room. There was a slight clatter as the red-haired girl got up and set an

electric fan in motion. Sally noticed that she could reach it easily. The moving air was slightly more tolerable than the same heavy mixture motionless and Sally could almost fancy that it came more freshly into the lungs.

She was beginning to doze again when a hatchway between the men's and the women's room opened, and the hoarse voice of Messenger Budge enquired how many for tea.

"Coffee," said the red-haired girl automatically.

"Weak," said somebody else.

"Oh, blow you, Budge! I'd just dropped off," said a third. These were all permanent staff. The four teachers, accustomed to the horrors of staff-room beverages prepared with tepid water by the eldest girls, smiled faintly, but made no remark.

Taking the general atmosphere for one of fervent thankfulness and joy, the obliging Budge closed the hatch and went off to achieve the hell-brew for which, said the red-haired girl bitterly, he would expect to be thanked when it arrived.

Three minutes later there was a loud rapping on the wooden hatchway between the rooms; an arm came through the aperture as one of the girls drew back the shutter, and a young man began handing in cups filled with very dark liquid.

"Compliments of the management. Will somebody sample the brew prepared by our Mr. Budge in person? Canteen under entirely new management. Coffee, per cup, fourpence. Per pot eightpence, served on tray."

The girl who had opened the hatch took the cups of coffee and handed them over. She was at the end table in charge of the telephones which connected the Control Room directly with the police and with the district A.R.P. headquarters in the neighbouring town of Winborough.

"Better say your prayers, Fletcher. It's obviously a gift from heaven," she said, as the cups passed from hand to hand. She peered at the black liquid in her short-sighted way before she relinquished the last saucer but one. She retained the last for herself.

"Two kisses, Fletcher," observed one of the permanent staff to the red-haired girl.

"Oh, damn!" said the red-haired girl, in response to this. "I do hope the fools haven't sugared it! Wonder whose idea it was, anyway? I suppose

we shall have to sub up again. Haven't had coffee for a week." She tasted the coffee, then took a second sip.

"If they have, I can't taste it," she said.

"It'll be all in the bottom of the cup if you don't stir it up, so be careful when you get to the dregs," suggested one of the girls in slacks.

"What's it like?" asked the very thin girl, before tasting hers.

"Oh, not bad. Bitter, that's all, but I don't mind that. They hadn't sugared it," she added, when she had finished it. She put down her cup and glanced at the clock.

"Nothing more to-night, I suppose?" she said.

She took out a small mirror, tidied her hair, put on her coat, picked up the torch, and made for the door through which the other torch-bearers had recently passed.

"Want an escort?" enquired one of the damsels in slacks. There was a chorus of giggles from the permanent staff as though a joke had been made.

"I know my way, I think," she responded, arousing more mirth. "Thanks, all the same, for the offer."

Out she went, and about ten minutes later the cups were collected by Budge.

"'Allo," he observed, gazing around. "What 'appened to Lady Godiva?"

As this was a query not easily answered in the circumstances, the other young ladies remained silent but one of them glanced towards the door.

"Oh? Sorry I spoke," observed the retailer of ambrosia and nectar. "Sugar? In the cup without the 'andle. Didn't see it, didn't you? Better luck next time, then. Sorry there isn't many spoons. That's on account of the gents having a sweepstake on who can get 'Itler's photograph on the nose with flicking dabs of jam out of a tin of plum and apple. Mr. Aitcheston brought it in with 'im. A relic, 'e says, of the War that *was* a War. No sugar for you, Miss?" he added approaching Sally. "I see you 'asn't guzzled yours like the rest of 'em in 'ere."

"No, thanks," Sally replied. "I say…" she glanced at the clock when the little man had collected the other cups and had gone. "I don't know whether there's another way in, or something, but that girl who went out with the torch has been gone a quarter of an hour. Do you think she's all right?"

(“Shades of mother,” she thought, “why on earth do I want to interfere?”)

“Shouldn’t worry,” said the girl in the knitted suit. “She may have gone round to see the auxiliary firemen. They’ve got a depot at the back just across the road. I believe she’s engaged to one of them. That’s why we laughed when she went out.”

She spread a blanket on the coconut matting which covered the concrete floor, lay down, scientifically rolled herself up, and very soon was asleep.

At last four o’clock came, and even half-past four. Sally had dozed once or twice, but was far too uncomfortable to be able to abandon herself to sleep. The four teachers all had their heads on the table, the two armchairs had long been occupied, and even the tall reporter, her newspaper fallen to the floor, her young, fair-skinned countenance babyishly flushed, and one arm hanging nearly to the ground, was deeply, unequivocally asleep.

Sally got up very quietly, and opened the door between the room she was in and that where Ferdinand was. Her black-haired, black-browed cousin was apparently absorbed in his work. One or two men looked up indifferently as she entered, another smiled at her. She went straight up to Ferdinand and said:

“I’m so bored, Bertie. Talk to me for a bit.”

Ferdinand Lestrange looked up. He was a self-centered, strangely self-sufficient man, but he was fond of his young cousin in his cold but unexacting fashion. He put down his finely-pointed pen.

“What’s up, Sally? Can’t you go to sleep? There are beds of a sort in that building behind your room, you know. At least, I believe they’re stretchers, but I don’t suppose they’re uncomfortable. The blankets may be very rough. Didn’t you bring your own rug?”

“Another building, did you say? Oh, well, that’s a weight off my mind. That’s where the girl with the red hair went, I suppose. I was feeling a bit worried about her. She went out at three and hasn’t come back.”

“Oh? Did she say she was going to bed?”

“Oh, no. She just went out, saying she knew her way. Apparently they usually go out two together.”

“Yes. It’s horribly dark outside. A beast of a night, too. It’s turned to rain again, although we can’t hear it in here. Did the others expect her

back?"

"Yes, I suppose they did. She took the official torch, anyway. Would she have done that if she'd been going to stay? I spoke to the others, and they think she's gone over to see an auxiliary fireman."

Ferdinand frowned, but thoughtfully, not in annoyance. He scrawled some meaningless lines on an odd piece of paper, then suddenly crossed the room, still with the pen in his hand, and spoke to a couple of men who were silently playing cards at a table in an angle of the wall. Sally saw them shrug and grin, and glance at one another. Ferdinand came back to her, and said:

"I expect it's all right. You go back, and try to get some sleep. I'll see to it, Sally. I'll send Budge or Simmonds over."

"Oh, heavens! I didn't come in to make a fuss! I only came in to talk to you for a bit."

"No, no. It's odd, you see, just a little, that the girl should have taken the torch. They're very nice and considerate to one another, really, the girls in there. She wouldn't have taken the torch. I think, for my own peace of mind, I'll send a messenger over. Don't be alarmed, my dear. An extensive acquaintance with murderers has probably made me unduly…" He broke off at the expression of incredulous horror on Sally's face. "It's all right! Don't look like that, for heaven's sake! I was only joking."

"Yes," said Sally, "but…"

"Back you go," said Ferdinand, "and I'll send you the news of her safety—inconsiderate little fathead—as soon as the man comes back. By the way, here's that note for the girl who came in so late."

Sally returned to the telephonist's room with the note. A girl in one of the arm-chairs rose out of it and, with a gesture, invited Sally to take her turn.

"It's the only comfortable sleep you can get in here," she said.

"No, no thanks, really," said Sally. "I just…" She crossed over to the young reporter who was awake, and was ruefully rubbing pins and needles out of her long legs.

"This place!" said the reporter. "Hullo! You look a bit like Banquo's ghost. Feel all right?"

"Yes, quite all right," said Sally. "The fact is…"

She was interrupted by a sudden startled exclamation from the girl in the knitted suit.

"Grasshoppers!" she said. "Where on earth is Fletcher?"

"If that's the girl with the red hair," said one of the teachers, "we were wondering about her ourselves. But somebody said she'd gone…"

"Yes, but she ought to be back! She never stays out for more than half an hour. For one thing, she'd soon get the sack. Besides, she's got our torch!"

"I think we ought to go out to the lavatories to see whether she's been taken ill. Or has anybody else been over there since she went?" said the older woman in tweeds. "After all, she *did* say she'd had cocktails. Of course, she may be quite used to them, but…"

"Nobody's been across since she went out," said one of the girls in slacks, and another observed, "Not without the torch to *that* particular 'Better 'Ole.'"

"I've got a torch," said a teacher, looking up from the table. "You can borrow it, if you like."

At this moment the hatch was opened from the men's side, and Simmonds put his head in.

"Sir Ferdinand's compliments, and nothing to report from the auxiliary firemen, Miss Sally. Sir Ferdinand thinks the permanent ladies ought to make a little investigation out the back, in case the young lady should perhaps have been taken ill or fainted."

He withdrew, closed the hatch, and the girls all looked at one another.

"I'll go," said the knitted suit, "if somebody else will come."

"Come on," said Sally to the reporter. At least five others volunteered to accompany them.

"Come on, then, Beach," said the knitted suit to a pair of navy-blue slacks surmounted by a blithe canary jumper. "Put your coats on, people. It's 'orrid cold after this stuffy hole, going out in the nice fresh air."

"I believe it's wet, too," said Sally.

She led the way, and one by one the others slipped through the inner and then the outer door. It was new ground to Sally. She found herself in a narrow passage which led round the angle of the building into what would have been a quadrangle had it had a fourth side, but this was missing. On three sides, however, loomed buildings, some of them partly screened by dripping trees.

"Stick to the path," said the leader of the party, using the torch, although quite unconsciously, to guide only her own footsteps. "There's a

rockery with a fountain in the middle. You don't want to fall over that."

"Oh, lor! This battery's gone!" said the bearer of the only other torch. "What a curse! These small batteries are frightfully scarce. You can't get them anywhere in the town."

"Fletcher is a nuisance," said somebody, loudly and cheerfully. "She needn't have taken the *torch*!"

The path was asphalt, and was about four feet wide. It was slippery and treacherous with autumn leaves which had fallen thickly upon it from trees at the rear of the building. The rain had made the leaves sodden. Sally was last in the procession. Everybody kept to the path.

The small building for which they were making was on the opposite side of the yard, however, and the leader made a sudden, disconcerting dive across to it.

"Not right over the rockery!" said someone. "It isn't a steeplechase! Ow! I've stepped in a puddle!"

Soon Sally saw the rockery, and had an absurd impulse, due, she thought, to the effect—a curious light-headed feeling—which the fresh, cold, rainy air of the night was having upon her after the close and stuffy room, to climb the rockery and dance on it. Abandoning the idea, she reached, in the wake of the little party, the entrance to the building they were in search of. It was labelled heavily in white Roman capitals on a blank ground: 'Ladies.' The leader flashed the torch. The building had three compartments. It took less than ten seconds to flash the torch into each.

"Well, she ain't here," said someone. "*Now* how do we go?"

"She's been bad, though," said the reporter's voice from the other side of the rockery. "Hope she isn't sickening for something. Some earth or sand on it wouldn't do any harm. I know where there's a leaking sandbag."

"Oh, hallo, Pat," said Sally. "I'd lost track of you."

"Well, if you *will* come last. Where *has* this idiot got to, do you suppose? Come on, people. Follow me for the sand, and everyone scoop up a couple of handfuls. This vomit of hers may be infectious, and, anyway, it would be a kindly thought to cover it up, don't you think? Lend me the torch, if the thought of it turns you green."

Picking their way, she and Sally and one or two of the others performed their charitable act.

Then they returned, along the dark wall of the building, to the Control Room, and settled down.

“You know, I don’t like it,” said Sally, after a bit. “I wish I’d brought a torch. I’d go and have another look for her. She may have come over all bad in the yard and fainted. We didn’t look about particularly. She had certainly been very sick.”

“I expect she felt ill and went home. I know I’d like to,” said one of the permanent staff. “I expect she’s safely in bed.”

“And we’d have fallen over her, surely,” the reporter remarked, “if she’d been lying out in the yard. She knows the way all right, and she had a torch. It seems to me that she’d just have dropped on the path. If she’d fainted we couldn’t have helped but stumble over her.”

“I’m going to see whether one or two of the men will come and help look,” said Sally, who had inherited a good deal of Lady Selina’s dogged insistence upon doing what she felt was the right thing, however inconvenient and annoying this might be to herself or other people. “I don’t believe she’d go home. She didn’t seem a bit that sort to me. She’d have let us know if she was going.”

“All right, then. Meanwhile, I will read this note, and see what Sour-Puss has got in store for me,” said the reporter. “Tell you when you come back.”

When Sally returned, however, the young reporter had gone into the yard again.

Meanwhile, Sir Ferdinand and the faithful Simmonds had gone round to the courtyard from the Control Room entrance. Sally went out to them, and soon could see the light of Sir Ferdinand’s torch. Having no torch of her own, she made for him, and asked:

“Any luck, Bertie?”

The men searched the ground methodically, a yard at a time. Simmonds followed his employer, saving his own torch until Sir Ferdinand should require it.

“Look out for the rockery,” said Sally. They came upon it the next minute.

“Looks more like a cairn,” said Sir Ferdinand. “And why the hole at the top?”

“It’s a fountain, I think,” Sally answered, “But I’ve never seen it in daylight. I say, don’t climb it, Bertie. You’ll break your ankle, or something.”

“Hullo, you people? Any luck?” enquired Pat from the darkness near the gate.

“Sally,” said Sir Ferdinand, from the top, without paying any attention to the young reporter’s question, “go back with Simmonds to the Control Room and ask Mr. Arthur to come here.”

“You haven’t…?”

“Yes, she’s here, and she’s had a nasty fall. Her head’s in rather a mess. And when you’ve found Mr. Arthur (he’s a surgeon) you might ring up for an ambulance. Miss Mort, you go with her.”

“Anything wrong, sir?” asked Simmonds, who detected an unusual note in Ferdinand’s calm voice.

“Yes, badly wrong, I’m afraid. Go in our way, and ask Mr. Spence to get through to the police. Tell him quietly, mind. We don’t want a fuss at present. Here, take my torch, and get a move on.”

He was left there alone. There was nothing, he knew, that the cleverest surgeon could do for the red-haired girl. There was not the slightest doubt that she was dead. Her feet were resting in the wide, deep bowl of the fountain. Her body was awkwardly twisted over the side. Her forehead—she lay face upwards—was horrid with blood, and her face was almost obscured by it.

• CHAPTER 4 •

Anatomy for Artists.
Title of a book by Eugene Wolff, M.B., F.R.C.S., illustrated by George Charlton.

• 1 •

Detective-Inspector Stallard was having his tea on the afternoon of September the twenty-eighth when the telephone rang. This was the third notice he received of strange deaths which had taken place within his district. His sergeant reported the finding of the body of a woman in the A.R.P. tank in Longdale Lane.

"Don't you know who it is?" he demanded. His piece of cake was in his hand, for he had stepped to the telephone still holding it, and whilst he listened to the sergeant's reply, he took a solemn bite. It had been odd enough to hear that one of the best-known of the Town Councillors, a man named Blackburn-Smith, had been discovered dead in a doorway in the black-out, and that a post-mortem examination had resulted in a discovery of arsenic in the body; it had been exciting enough to hear of the Report Centre telephonist, Lillie Fletcher, who had been found murdered in the Town Hall yard; it was overwhelming to hear of a third unnatural death within the same twenty-four hours.

"We've no idea, sir," his sergeant assured him over the telephone. "Will you step around, sir, and see if p'raps she means anything at all to you?"

It did not take Stallard very long to make quite certain that the dead woman, who was dressed neatly, but not extravagantly, in a very plain white night-gown and a pair of flannel drawers, meant nothing whatever to him.

He stared at the pallid, puffy face and darkened eyelids a long time after the police doctor had concluded his examination, but not the faintest

stirring of an excellent memory for the faces of his flock gave him any assistance whatever.

"No, I don't know her," he was forced to admit. "Any marks of identification?"

"Only the laundry mark on the night-dress, sir," said the sergeant, pointing it out.

The police doctor had no difficulty in discovering that the woman had drowned, and the local paper, with supreme contempt for the coroner's findings, hinted darkly at murder, and demanded extra police patrols during the black-out hours; the coroner, who had sat without a jury, had decided that the deceased had taken her own life, probably in a fit of melancholy due to the outbreak of the war, and had hinted that she was possibly a refugee from Germany or Austria. His considered verdict was that the deceased had taken her own life whilst the balance of her mind was affected, and in this merciful summing-up the young inspector, already almost stunned by local repercussions following the other two deaths, found himself happy to concur. He was feeling, with two murders and a suicide at one time in his district, a little like the Scottish minister who prayed for rain, and had the parish almost immediately flooded. "Loard, Loard," he had then observed, "I ken weel we prayed for rain; but, Loard, this is rideeculous!"

It was not in the least ridiculous, however, but annoying and perturbing, when a correspondent of the local paper, which, in the words of its exultant editor, was making hay while the sun shone, pointed out that it was strange that the unknown woman should have drowned herself in the A.R.P. tank when the canal was quite near and much handier. The paper, in fact, decided the inspector, was determined to find a third murder. He called upon the editor and protested. He even threatened him a little. The editor, who had been resident in the town thirty years, said, talking through a blue pencil which he was holding between his teeth:

"Don't you think yourself, though, that it was funny, Inspector? You would, if you knew this town as well as I do. I never publish anonymous letters. That letter was signed, and it had an address at the top. If I told you whose, you'd hardly believe me. Naturally, we didn't print it."

"Well, whose?" asked the inspector, immediately.

"Joe Canopy's"

"Give me his address, please. I don't know him."

"Joseph Canopy, master and part owner of the barge *Tulip*, now somewhere between here and Manchester. The actual address he gave was the Boatmen's Institute here."

"Ah! Have you got the original letter?"

"Oh, yes." He picked up the house telephone.

The inspector then saw the police doctor who had examined the body.

"Any reason to suppose that the suicide case was drowned in the canal?" he enquired. The police doctor was a red-nosed, brisk, pugnacious man of fifty, and was doctor to the local football team as well as to the police. He rubbed his chin, and answered cautiously:

"Young man, you're putting words into my mouth. You've been reading the local paper."

"So have you, then. That letter was written by a chap on a canal barge. Fellow named…"

"Don't tell me. I know. Joe Canopy. Regular sea-lawyer, that chap."

"Oh?" The inspector's youthful brow cleared rapidly, and he grinned. "Thanks for the tip, Doctor. I'll do as much for you one day."

"Eh?" said the doctor, staring after him as he walked past the window and down to the green-painted gate. "Hm! Pity you didn't give me another five minutes!"

He went across the room to a glass-fronted cupboard labelled facetiously, "Mrs. Moon's 'Orrors," and took down a small jar. In it was floating a two-inch sliver of river weed, fine and thin as a hair. He regarded it affectionately, holding the glass up to the light, and then replaced it carefully. He locked the ghoulish little cupboard and pocketed the key. Next time he encountered the inspector he said, provokingly:

"Wonder whether Joe saw anything?"

The inspector, who had spent a difficult hour and a half at the residence of the late Councillor Blackburn-Smith, groaned feebly, but refused to play to the doctor's opening gambit. Nevertheless, his conscience troubled him. Apart from letters in the local paper, common sense informed him that to drown oneself in an A.R.P. tank offers difficulties and has disadvantages. With the canal so near, and the nights so peculiarly black, it seemed to have been sheer idiocy on the woman's part. Still, he reflected, when the balance of one's mind is disturbed, perhaps one automatically prefers the difficult action to the easy one, and is prepared to accomplish considerable and uncomfortable athletic feats in order to follow one's bent.

Nevertheless, he was not satisfied. He rang up the Manchester police, and asked to be put in touch with Joseph Canopy, of the barge *Tulip*, when that master of craft should tie up in the Ship Canal. Then he went back to his notes upon Councillor Smith.

• 2 •

For fifty-nine years the Blackburn-Smith family had lived in the house at the top of the hill. The new main road, up which the buses ran, was a quarter of a mile from their turning, and therefore their house retained much the same characteristics as it had had in mid-Victorian times, when it was built. Looking at it, one imagined the stern father, pious mother, and eleven children who had lived there in 1860. One did not believe that so obviously a family residence could be inhabited only by an uncle, a niece and a nephew, still less that the uncle could have been discovered dead in a doorway in the black-out of September, 1939.

Patricia Mort, reporter, of the *Willington Record*, stood at the gate and pensively licked a copying-ink pencil, then she took out a mirror from her handbag and put out her tongue, only to click it at the violet spot on its tip and put the mirror away again.

Pat had come to interview the relatives of the deceased, and was wondering how best to set about her task. All her reports for the local paper were based upon interviews with such of the residents as had achieved notoriety or fame, but, until the dramatic discovery of Councillor Blackburn-Smith's body in a shop doorway late at night (by two young people whom she had already interviewed), she had had little practice in reporting violent death, for street accidents were not in her province.

She opened the gate and walked up the gravel path to the front door. The knocker, keyhole, and brass letter-box were brightly polished. There was a blackleaded iron shoe-scraper beside the doorstep and a neat red-patterned fibre mat in the porch. The bell was a small black button set in a white surround. Pat pressed it. With the suddenness of a Jack-in-the-box, a tongue of celluloid shot out and before, with equal suddenness, it withdrew she had time to read the words: 'No reporters, no hawkers, no circulars,' printed on it. The late Councillor Smith had had his own idea of humour.

Pat, true to her calling, took up the knocker and banged vigorously.

• 3 •

"You ought not to have mentioned the poison," said Melchior Blackburn to his sister. The edges of the black-out blinds, which were of thick, opaque satin, hung out beyond the edges of the original drawing-room curtains, and gave melancholy emphasis, it seemed to Elvira Blackburn, to the fact of her uncle's death. She went across and straightened them before she answered her brother's challenge.

"Don't stand on the sheepskin rug, Mel," she said, determined to put herself to some extent in the right, and in the position of dictator, before the argument began. "After all, everybody knows by now that Uncle Smith made a new will when war broke out. It's no use trying to keep dark a fact which came out at the inquest."

"I suppose you realise," said her brother, seating himself and hitching up the knees of his trousers, although his feet were fully extended across the sheepskin rug towards the aspidistra in the fireplace, "that we shall have the police here again at any moment? And yet you must go and give that stork of a girl every atom of information in our possession! I respected Uncle, if you didn't, and I'm hanged if I want to see his name on the front page of the local rag for the next five weeks or so. You know what reporters are—especially girl reporters! No sense of the fitness of things, and no decency. Sometimes I wonder whether you've any yourself!"

"Why not accuse me of poisoning Uncle, and have done with it?" said his sister, with the dangerous calm of a person on the verge of nervous collapse.

"Oh, don't be silly, El. But the fact does remain—and our squabbling with each other won't alter it—that we're in the deuce of a hole. Uncle was poisoned, and we inherit about thirty thousand pounds. It's no use blinking facts."

"He had a weak heart and a funny inside," said Elvira.

"Exactly." Her brother drew up his knees, hitched his trousers again as he did so, and looked up into her eyes. "And who knew that? We did."

"Plenty of people did."

"I know. But that doesn't let us out. I've lain awake for the past two nights trying to work out our position, and the more I think of it, the more utterly hopeless it seems. Who cooked his food? You did. Who acted as his

secretary and valet, and was never out of the house without his permission? Me!"

"I," said his sister automatically. "Oh, I know what you mean, but if we don't know anything, well, we don't and that's the long and short of it. Oh, Mel, don't scuffle on that rug!"

"What's it matter now?" said her brother brutally. "It all belongs to us. We're not his stewards—his beastly slaves—any more."

"Do you think people knew?" asked Elvira, after a pause, during which she went to the window and straightened the curtains again.

"Knew what?"

"How he bossed us, and how we disliked him, and how he only altered his will like that because you said you'd leave him, and take me with you?"

"I don't see how they could know. He wouldn't talk. And I haven't. How about you?"

"Even if I'd wanted to, there hasn't been much chance."

"And yet, you see, you go and blab it all out to that wretched girl!"

"Patricia Mort is not a wretched girl. She was the most brilliant girl the school has ever had. It wasn't her fault her parents couldn't afford to let her go to college for the diploma. In any case, she had to get experience on a local paper first. They all have to. And she could have gone to college if only uncle had tipped the Education Committee the wink when he was chairman. Anyhow, she already knew what I told her."

"How do you know that she knew?"

"She told me, quite frankly, all that she'd gathered at the inquest."

"But was she there? I didn't see her."

"We didn't look for her, did we? And, anyhow, nobody ever notices Pat, because you take her for granted. Anyway, I felt too horribly self-conscious and uncomfortable to look anywhere except at the coroner. I felt just as uncomfortable as I felt when I was in the third form, and somebody stole a girl's purse. It was dreadful. I felt certain that everybody, somehow, would think it was me."

"I," said her brother, without malice. "And don't talk about stealing, please. It's scarcely tactful."

"Oh, Mel, I'm sorry, but you know I didn't mean that."

"Well, shut up about it, anyway. I tell you what, though, El. We ought to help find out who did poison Uncle, you know. I mean, it's a very

uncomfortable thought that we haven't the least idea who could possibly have done such a thing."

"Mel?"

"What is it now?"

"I…suppose it wasn't you?"

"Good Lord, Elvira! Draw it mild!"

"Yes, but…was it, Mel?"

"I might as well ask you. We inherit the money between us."

"Oh, Mel, what an awful thing to say!"

"How is it worse than what you said?"

"Well, it isn't, I suppose. But who else would want to kill him, anyway?"

"That's what we've got to find out. And I'll tell you the first thing we ought to do about it. We ought to find out where Uncle went and who he was with on the evening of his death. Now, then, where can we start?"

"Let's start with tea. He was all right up to then."

"Yes. Now, what did he have?"

"What did we have, as well? I mean, if it didn't poison us, it couldn't have poisoned him."

"In that case I should think we could cut out tea. We all had exactly the same. I wish they hadn't adjourned the inquest. We ought to have heard the medical evidence about when the poison was probably administered. I wonder if one could possibly pump the doctor? I mean, we've probably got a perfect alibi."

"Do you know, Mel, I wish now I'd told the inspector that he did have some of that fish paste. You see, the jar got thrown away, and we could have got rid of it. Then they would have thought the poison might be in that, and…Oh, no. I see it wouldn't have helped."

"It certainly wouldn't. Anyway, they found the pot and sent it for analysis, just to make sure we were telling the truth, I suppose."

"Oh, Mel!"

"What is it?"

"Don't you see? If they should find arsenic in the fish paste it would go dreadfully against us, because they'd think we'd lied, and he did have some, and that we'd put it in, and…"

"There, don't cry, Elvira. It's no good giving way. We know we didn't poison the old blighter, so it follows that someone else, or something else—

it may have been accidental—did. We shall have to look further than tea-time. That is, if we can trust one another."

"Well, after tea he and I went over the household accounts."

"Did you tell the police about that?"

"I thought I'd better. Mollie probably heard Uncle call me a bitch. If that had come out, and I hadn't happened to mention it, the fat would have been in the fire."

"Yes. Blast that girl! She's always had ears on elastic. I can't think why we don't sack her. She's our servant now."

"Yes, and what would people say?"

"You mean, we'd got something to hide that the girl knew something about? Yes, and trust Mollie Slatter; she'd make up some tale or other just to spite us. I always thought that Uncle seduced her; in fact, that she was his mistress."

"Oh, I don't know about that. I think he liked her, but not in that sort of way."

"Well, as you say, we'd better keep her, at least until all this blows over."

"Oh, Mel, I wish it would. It's like a nightmare. Why on earth did he have to be poisoned? As though he wasn't enough trouble all his life to us, that he had to drag us into his death like this!"

"No good getting hysterics over it, old thing. Where were we? After the accounts. What next? Oh, and what was the time?"

"Well, tea was over by about a quarter to six. Then we did the accounts until about seven. It was all the quarterly payments—getting ready for them at the end of the month. Then there was a row about the laundry bill. He thought we ought to have towels washed at home. I told him Mollie wouldn't do it, and he said it wouldn't hurt me to give her a hand. I said I wouldn't mind if he'd buy a mangle and let us use an electric iron. Then we had words, and then he told me to pack up the bills and book, because he'd got to go off to a Council meeting."

"We could soon find out whether he went. There's his little book. It's printed with all the Council meetings, times and dates and things. Uncle never missed one—it's partly why he got so many votes—so if there was a meeting he was at it, and we can check up times again from there."

The leather-covered engagement book was discovered in a drawer of the dead man's desk. There was no Council meeting listed for the day of

their uncle's death.

"Looks queer," said Melchior, replacing the book. "Apparently the police didn't think this diary important, or Stallard would have carted it off. I'll tell you what. I like that chap, you know, El. I believe we'll get a square deal from him, I do, really."

"On the facts as he sees them. So do I. But is that good enough? I tell you, Mel, I'm scared about Uncle's death. You see, everybody seems to have liked him except us."

"Never mind. Get on with the washing. Ring up Mrs. Perk—she's another regular old-timer—and ask her whether there was not a special meeting that didn't get printed in the book. After all, the war wasn't on when that book went to press."

"Not Mrs. Perk, Mel. I really hardly know her. I've only spoken to her once. Better get one of the men. What about Councillor Commy? Or Councillor Grant?"

"Good old cronies of Uncle's! Yes, all right. It doesn't really matter who it is."

When his sister had gone out of the room to telephone, he picked up the little engagement book, fingered it absently, and then slipped it into his pocket.

"There wasn't a Council meeting," said his sister, coming back. "Why, Mel! Where's Uncle's book?"

Her brother looked round for it, then searched his pockets, and, from the last one he felt in, produced the book, with an air of embarrassment which seemed, in the circumstances, excessive. He handed it over.

"Good Lord! I can't remember putting it there," he said.

"Oh, Mel, you might be a bit more careful! It's just that sort of absent-mindedness that'll look so awfully bad," his sister said anxiously, putting the book into a drawer.

• 4 •

Patricia Mort bent over the local paper and, with a frown of concentrated thought upon her fair and otherwise unwrinkled forehead, re-read Joe Canopy's letter and then compared the editor's version with the epistle she held in her hand.

Dear Sir (Joe Canopy had written),

Theres goings on down the canal you ought to know about this murder I mean murder did ought to be looked into by the police and A.R.P. all my eye because dark deeds can be hid in the Blackout old Haw-Haw is right enough that's why some fools takes notice of all his lies because he gets the truth sometimes. And we ought to see to it. I could tell more than this but what good will it do me well the Boatmen's Institute will find me if you want me some game believe me lucky my barge don't make no noise and old Widder don't cough and her feet on soft ground at the time about sunset hows that for medical evidence I could tell you a good bit.

Yours truly.
Joseph Canopy, Master.

Pat put the letter carefully into its envelope, rested her chin on her hands, brooded for a bit, and then went to the top of the stairs.

"Mrs. Peat," she called over the banisters, "I'm ready when you are."

"Come on down, then, Miss," a voice replied. "Mr. Peat's come in and supper's on the hob. Have you got to go out again to-night?"

"Yes, I've got an assignment at the Grand."

"That'll be a treat for you, then. Come on, or you'll miss the beginning. That's a terrible good picture at the Grand."

"I hope I make a terrible good report of it, then," laughed Pat. She hunted through a book of cuttings and found Miss Lejeune's review of the film in the *Observer*. She read it carefully, replaced it lovingly, then ran down the stairs to the kitchen.

"I can't see why they want you to write up the films, I'm sure," said her landlady, serving her with mutton rissoles and some rice. "Bread, Miss? I'm sure you know who's in it is quite enough for me. Once you know the stars you can't go wrong. There's that ducky Merle Oberon, for instance."

"But you can't always know the stars," muttered Pat, thinking not of Miss Oberon, but of her own ambitions.

• CHAPTER 5 •

A dish with punched decoration: Cromwellian style, London, 1653-4.
Description by D. Kighley Baxandall of a piece in the collection of Lord Harlech.

• 1 •

"You know," said Councillor Mrs. Perk to her thin-faced, iron-grey husband, "I still think I ought to go to the police about poor old Councillor Smith."

"My dear girl, rubbish!" said her husband, very sharply. He picked up a glass of sherry from the tray his wife was holding. "I've told you before, and I say again, that I would go with you myself to the police if I thought even remotely necessary. But it isn't, and it would only land you—and me, of course!—in a lot of beastly unpleasantness. The police want somebody who saw the last of him. Well, that wasn't you. If it was anybody, I should think it would be the chap who keeps the pub! From what I know of Smith, he was not the man to leave the 'Rat and Cow-catcher' whilst it was still legally open."

"But, Arthur, it seems he did."

"Then somebody must have enticed him, and that person is most probably the murderer. Now, Emmy, do please be reasonable. I particularly don't want our name in newspaper headlines, especially local ones. You know what a feast of reason and flow of soul the *Record* has treated us to this last week! Three editions, special features and articles, pious editorials, and a correspondence column the length of a month of Sundays! Besides, it's simply wasting the time of the police. They want the last person who saw him; not people who were with him at some time during the evening."

"But, Arthur, darling, I've been reading up about arsenic, and it says…"

“To hell with arsenic!” He sipped sherry as though he were drinking a heartfelt toast.

“No, but, Arthur…”

Big, fair and personable, she walked across the grey and blue carpet, across parquet flooring, across a wide hall and a book-lined room. She returned triumphantly, seated herself on a stool, and pulled him into a chair beside her. Mr. Perk, who had finished his sherry and was reaching for the decanter, put his glass down with a sigh.

“You needn’t, darling.” She poured him out another glass, gave it to him, and resumed her seat on the stool. “Just listen to this while you drink it.”

“Irritant poisons: In the case of the milder irritants, the results may be deferred for a few hours, particularly when a full meal has been taken along with the poison.”

“Stop a minute,” said her husband. “That’s what must have happened.”

“What?”

“He took the poison along with his dinner that night. Therefore you’re not brought into it, and your evidence that you were with him after his dinner is valueless.”

“But, Arthur, he didn’t have dinner.”

“How do you know that?”

“He has often told me he didn’t. He said that what was good enough for his father was good enough for him, and would have to be good enough for his niece and nephew. I’m sorry for those poor children, Arthur, you know. They inherit all the money, and are sure to be suspected of the murder.”

“Don’t sound so ghoulish, Emmy.”

“Well, darling, to go on with what I was saying: he’s told me several times that his household have a large midday meal, a high tea at about half-past five, and then supper—cheese and cocoa and things—just before they go to bed. So where does your full meal come in? He wouldn’t have had his supper that night before he died.”

“High tea might be a full meal. No, Emmy, look. Be logical. Either the man took the poison at tea-time before you and the others met him, or else he took it after you’d left the ‘Rat and Cow-catcher.’ And while we’re on the subject of the ‘Rat and Cow-catcher’…”

"Don't tell me," interrupted his wife. "I know. Prompt me if I go wrong or can't remember. You asked me at the very beginning not to accept that silly invitation to go with the rest of the Committee to the 'Rat and Cow-catcher'; you said that no good would come of it; you said that it was undignified and unwise; you begged me to take your advice. And," she added, changing her voice, "I jolly well wish, my poor old man, that I had taken it, for I am very far from easy in my mind."

• 2 •

Young Derek Coffin looked at the large stone which the police inspector was holding and looked away again.

"I wouldn't know where it came from," he said. "I mean to say…" he cleared his throat, "it's like this…what I mean…they're all the same, aren't they? So how should I know?"

"But your fiancee, Lillie Fletcher, came over here on the night of her death, didn't she?"

"No. But she came other evenings."

"Those don't signify. It's last Thursday week I'm concerned with. Now don't lose your head, Coffin, there's a good chap. Nobody thinks you did it…"

"Oh, don't they? You ought to live down our road!"

"My good chap, be sensible. Don't think about things like that. Just answer my questions. Look here, I want you to tell me about the rows you had with Lillie Fletcher."

"Rows? With Lillie? But I never…"

"Oh, yes, you did. Her girl friends know all about them. No use your stalling. Out with it. What were the rows about?"

"Because I went out a time or two with somebody else, I suppose."

"According to the girl friends, you suppose right. Now, Coffin, at what time was she over here at the Auxiliary Fire Station that night?"

"She never came."

"Steady on, now. Was it her usual time?"

"I tell you straight, Inspector, she never came!"

"What was her usual time?"

“Look here, you can’t tie me down like that. You can’t tie me down! I won’t be! I don’t know what time she generally came, not exactly. And, look here Inspector! I don’t have to answer your questions!”

“Of course you don’t, you silly chap,” said Stallard with a sigh. He began to put away his notebook.

“Stop a minute,” said the young man, taken a little aback by this manoeuvre. “I think it was about a quarter to two she generally came over. But I tell you…”

“That checks with what the girls at the Report Centre thought,” said Stallard. “How long did she stay?”

“Ten minutes, I should think. Sometimes more. But I’ll tell you why she never came that night. I’d seen her the night before, and, all it was, she came to hand me the frozen mitt—hand me my hat, you know—and I couldn’t argue, and neither could she, not in there, so I said I’d see her in the morning, and perhaps she would meet me for lunch. She said she wouldn’t, and bundled off, and that’s all I know, and I tell you I haven’t seen her since!”

“Do you know how she was killed? The murderer lay in wait for her and struck her with one of the stones from the rockery—a stone like this.”

“They didn’t say that at the inquest.”

“I know. I asked them not to. Anyway, the inquest isn’t finished. The end of it is postponed until the police get more evidence. Now I know pretty well, Coffin, that, so far, you’ve stuck to the truth. Besides, you didn’t want to lose Lillie, did you? You had no motive for killing her? The quarrel didn’t make you want to kill her? No! You’re too sensible a chap.”

“What do you take me for?”

“Who else did Lillie quarrel with, besides you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Come, now.”

“No, I don’t know. We didn’t have the same friends. She came a bit classier than me.”

“There were no finger-prints on the stone, Coffin. That’s a funny thing, isn’t it?”

“Everybody who’s been to the pictures or read books knows to wipe them off.”

“Did you wipe them off, by any chance?”

“I’ve told you all I know. It was somebody, I reckon who knew about me and Lillie Fletcher, and wanted to plant it on me. Looks as though they’ve managed to do it, too, with you keep on asking me questions.”

“Only routine, you know, Coffin. As a matter of fact, we don’t at all think you did it.”

“Why don’t we think he did it, sir?” asked the sergeant, as they got on their way. “Looks a likely young thug to me.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. He’s a decent lad, I think. Besides, as I told you before, I’m pretty sure that all our three deaths are connected, and, so far as we can establish—and we’ve worked pretty hard on the case, as you’ll bear witness”—the sergeant looked gratified at this—“there’s nothing to connect Lillie Fletcher with Councillor Smith, still less with our unknown suicide.”

• 3 •

The barge *Tulip* proceeded north and a point by west along a waterway which, at the time that is being chronicled, was bordered by a flat wet meadow on one side and the towing path, which ran beside a private estate, on the other. The scenery, which was pretty but undistinguished (as the master of the barge had just observed to his mate, in other words, respecting a girl who had just walked past with a little dog on a lead) went unnoticed by the occupants of the barge; for Mrs. Canopy was peeling potatoes, and Joe, at the tiller, was in conversation with his mate, who was mending a shirt.

The conversation, except for such deviations from the main theme as that afforded by the girl on the towing path, was based, in essence, upon the information which Inspector Stallard was later to obtain from Mr. Canopy, and ran, more or less, as follows:

“Mother can say what she likes, but I wrote that letter on purpose to the paper, to clear myself, like, later on.

“If I’d been living in the place, instead of just passing through, I’d have told the police what I seen, but, only passing through, you see, I never. What I say is, get yourself into trouble, you can, not passing on what you see, and what I see by the island, it was murder, or very like it.”

“What did you see, then?”

“See one of ’em pulling the other one out of the river, and one of ’em in trousers, the one that was doing the pulling.”

“Might have been a woman.”

“No, it was a man all right, I reckon. Tall and thin, ’e was. Though, come to that,” he added, conceding the point, “these days, when every second woman’s got trousers on, you can’t hardly tell, at a distance. Let me catch my old gal in ’em, that’s all!”

He spat over the side and shouted at the horse.

“Indecent, that’s what it is. On the other ’and, might just as well ’ave been a man; in fact, I reckon it was, at that…”

“And the trousers pulled t’other one out? Sounds more like a rescue than a murder,” prompted the mate.

“But I’d ’eard the sound of blop just before, I tell you! Blop! Like that. Looked as if they was fighting each other or something, when in goes the skirt, ber-lop! That’s how I figure it out. Ber-lop! she goes, and t’other one gets windy and fishes her out. That’s how I see it happen, but in me mind’s eye, not eye-witness.”

“But it said in the paper it wasn’t a skirt, but a night-gowned,” the mate objected. “You couldn’t ’ave thought a skirt and a night-gowned was the same.”

“Ah, but I never see no night-gowned. Night-gowneds is white. This was a darkish kind of skirt, all clinging wet, and the trousers fetching ’er out. No, there wasn’t no night-gowneds in it, I’d swear to that.”

“Stands to reason it couldn’t be the female, then, as was found in the tank, Joe, doesn’t it?”

“Well, you can’t ’ardly say that. Ever ’eard of ’iding your tracks?”

“No.”

“Concealin’ evidence?”

“No.”

“Misleadin’ the police with intent to deceive?”

“No.”

“Oh, ’aven’t you, though, Tom Gardner? Oo led the donkey away, so’s he shouldn’t bray and give you away, that time you thought you’d ’ave the ’andlin’ of old Mother Greenacre’s goslin’s?”

“Does that come under the ’eading?”

“Search yourself! Ever ’ear of an accessory after the fact?”

“No.”

“No, I don’t reckon you ’ave. Comes of being born and brought up among the barges. Now I got my education regular. Well, if I hadn’t a-written that letter to the paper, I might ’ave made myself an accessory after the fact to this ’ere crime, because I’d be going on letting ’em think it was a suicide and she done it herself in the tank, when all the time it was a murder, and she had it done to ’er in the river.”

“In the river?”

“Ah! That’s what I said. Other side Littleton Eyot.”

“But you can’t see the other side from the canal, Joe.”

“You can as you passes the bridge.”

“Oh, ah. As you passes the bridge. Freddle my needle for me, Joe, wile I ’olds you the stick. Took me arf hour to freddle ’er last time, it did.”

“And I shouldn’t be surprised,” said Joe, squinting at the needle’s eye as he threaded it with cotton, “if I found a police message waitin’ for me at Manchester, because, although I never see her go in, I ’eard the ber-lop, you see, and see ’im fishin’ ’er out. If it ’ad been a rescue, she wouldn’t ’ave been put in the tank. What you got to say about that?”

“Different woman,” said the mate.

Stallard was more puzzled than enlightened by Joe’s evidence. On the evening of the murder of Councillor Smith and the supposed suicide of the unknown woman, the bargee had been, for an instant, eye-witness of what appeared to be an attempt at rescuing a drowning person from the river. The inspector knew the place well, and tested for himself the bargee’s assertion that the place of rescue could be seen from the canal. Mr. Canopy’s almost passionate insistence on the sound of the splash he had heard was discountenanced by the inspector who said to young Sally Lestrange, who had known him since the time he was a schoolboy, that the real problem now before the police was whether it was worth while to conclude that the bargee was right, and that the woman he had seen pulled out of the water was the corpse found in the tank, or whether it was reasonable to conclude that the young woman who had been rescued had not died, but was somebody entirely different.

“You’d better make sure,” said Sally, who had Lady Selina’s dislike of the mysterious and the unfinished. “Personally, I think all Canopy saw was an accident, the result of larking about on the towing path.”

Stallard was of the same opinion, and tried his hardest to find someone who had accidentally tumbled or slipped or been pushed into the river and

had been pulled out either by a man or by a tall woman in trousers.

This led him nowhere at all. The second obvious line of approach was the clothing. If, as Mr. Canopy asserted (upon no evidence whatsoever, so far as the inspector could make out), the woman found in the tank had been murdered, the murderer must have removed almost all his victim's clothes and put on her the night-gown before hiding the body in the cistern.

"The clothes were marked, I expect," suggested Sally. "If you could find them, you'd know who the woman was."

"I doubt it," said the inspector morbidly. "Not so easy as that, you know, Sally, old thing."

But, all the same, he hunted high and low for the clothes; turned the town inside out and upside down; gave the delirious local paper material for yet two more special editions and the London dailies some more copy. The clothes, however, could not be found—at any rate, not without a search-warrant—and the inspector, without reluctance, came to the conclusion that Joe Canopy's splash had been a figment of imagination.

Then his witness came forward: the doctor with his sliver of river-weed. The inspector was much incensed.

"I only said I took it out of her. I don't see that you can prove much from it," said the doctor, on the defensive, but grinning at Stallard's annoyance. "You popped off so quickly last time, otherwise…"

"You great, ugly fathead!" shouted Stallard. "Doesn't it prove murder? Why should anybody plant her in that tank after she'd been in the river, unless he'd murdered her? It's the only explanation."

"And ought to have been offered you before," said Sally, firmly, when she heard it. "I don't suppose the doctor wanted to give it up to you, though. I expect it's one of his specimens." She had been introduced, some months previously, to 'Mrs. Moon's 'Orrors,' and approved of them. "I don't see why he shouldn't have his hobby, the same as anybody else."

"I do, when it means he's withheld the evidence for murder. I could make things very awkward for him," said Stallard.

"Yes, but, Ronnie, you still can't prove she drank it out of the river. It might have got into the cistern and she swallowed it drowning herself. After all, you haven't found those clothes. Until you do, and under suspicious circumstances, you still can't prove that the dead woman, poor thing, and the woman that bargee saw being pulled up out of the water, are one and the same, can you?"

"If they aren't, why doesn't the rescued woman come forward? I've asked for her often enough."

"Oh, she probably belongs to the class that doesn't like to be mixed up in anything. I think it's perfectly natural no one's come forward. I should just clock it as suicide, and call it a day, and concentrate on Councillor Smith and Lillie Fletcher."

"I've got a hunch the three deaths hang together," said Stallard obstinately. "And, if they do, one may prove another, if you follow."

"Oh, well, good luck, old thing. I say, Mother's absolutely rabid I had to give evidence at the inquest on poor Lillie Fletcher. She says you dare get me in the witness-box at anybody's trial for murder!"

• 4 •

Councillor Mrs. Perk was but one of several of the Willington ladies who were exercised in their minds as to the direction in which duty and interest lay.

Duty, in a sense, was plain. Self-interest, however, was divided. To go to the police with the tidings that they had been in the company of the late Councillor Smith shortly before he fell dead from arsenical poisoning was to handle fire, they felt.

"Not that we could possibly be suspected of knowing anything," was the burden of their songs to their husbands, "but if we don't say anything, won't it look, really, rather bad? Not that that nice boy Stallard could possibly think it would make the slightest difference, but…oughtn't we go to the police?"

On the other hand, there was the publicity—of a very undesirable sort. News of the three murders, all executed within the same twenty-four hours, had become a ramp with the local paper. The wives of prominent citizens, said the husbands (with one exception), did not want to get their names in that rag in such a connection, surely, did they?

The editor, whose long residence in the town had given him the feeling of the Willington pulse, realised the danger of the paper's present policy, but was anxious to keep up the sales.

"Let it ride," he said to his reporters, notably the youthful Patricia Mort who had a Fleet Street flair for news. "Let it ride for a while longer,

and then we'll have to draw our horns in. The elite are getting restive. Can't afford to offend the nobs, you know."

On the morning after the first news of the murders had leapt prominently into print, the anxious ladies who attended Councillor Smith's small party at the "Rat and Cow-catcher"—for reasons strictly civic and charitable, be it mentioned—read every subsequent edition of the local paper to find out whether the party had been reported.

"If it has," said Councillor Mrs. Perk to her husband, "I shall have to speak to young Stallard. I can't have him hunting me out and putting me down in his notebook, or whatever it is that they do."

"You thee-a, ducka, I feela it'th the buth'nith of the otherth to maka the firtht mova," said little fat Mrs. Zacharias to her husband, the thin little Jewish watchmaker in the High Street. "If they lika to tella the p'leetha, of courtha I'll backa them uppa."

"Of course, love," said Mr. Zacharias, regarding a mainspring with the same pride and fondness as he was accustomed to bestow upon his offspring (seven in number, and all doing well).

There it was left. Mrs. Zacharias also read the local paper, but her heart neither fluttered with fear nor leapt with relief as days passed and the party at the "Rat and Cow-catcher" did not appear in the news.

Sooner or later, however, Stallard was bound to light on it, and he did so, two days after the inquest on Lillie Fletcher, by combing the haunts, both reputable and the reverse, of the late Councillor Smith. He had come, very early in the case, to the sensible conclusion that, since he could get no further information about the unknown woman whose body had been found in the tank, and since every line on the death of Lillie Fletcher petered out —she had not even been pregnant, indicated the carefully worded report in the *Willington Record*—the best thing to do was to pursue an investigation into the death of Councillor Smith, and hope that that would lead him to fresh evidence in the case of the other two murders as well.

The "Rat and Cow-catcher" came late on his list of public-houses, for it was a rather disreputable little inn which had received a bad name in the early nineteenth century and had not lived it down.

Curiously enough, the landlord was a member of the Town Council. It was understood that he worked hard for the Poor Man and secured for him local amenities which other Councillors would not have troubled to acquire. In addition, Councillor Woods had received a military decoration in the

Great War, and was the organiser and (some said) the financier of the Old People's Christmas Dinner at the Town Hall. At any rate, he had not, for sixteen years, lacked votes.

"Look here, Woods," began Stallard. Councillor Woods, in the back parlour of the inn, put up a large, clean hand.

"I know, I know," he said soothingly, "and I ought to have come forward. But, honestly, now, Inspector, it couldn't have been one of the ladies."

Then the story of the odd little party came out, and, with it, the information which Stallard had been looking for.

"He sat on, after the ladies had all gorn—Mrs. Zacharias was the last of the party to leave—Smith sat on here a bit—I could show you the table…"

"Do," said the inspector.

"…and then he got up and went outside—I guessed why—and I fully expected to see him come back in here because I was a full ten minutes from closing. Well, I was busy in the public bar, and he, of course, had had his party in the saloon, so I didn't notice whether he came in again or not."

"Would your barmaid know?"

"Sure she'd know. I never thought of that."

The barmaid, found listlessly polishing glasses, was perfectly certain that Mr. Smith (whom she knew, and whom she diagnosed as always ready for his little bit of fun and so fresh that he'd slip off the ice) had not returned that evening.

"I made sure he had remembered a date, at the time, he went out so quick," observed the barmaid.

"So you didn't think he'd be back?" said Stallard, interested.

"I never thought either way, except he went out in such an 'urry."

"He didn't go out without paying for his last glass of beer?"

"Stout. Oh no, he paid when he had it, same as we always do. Of course, come to think of it, if he died of poison, poor thing, perhaps he started having a pain."

More than likely, thought the inspector.

"Who cleans up out there for you?" he asked.

"Bert!" bellowed Councillor Woods.

"Bert," said Stallard, "are people sick any night when you close the house?"

“Not on the premises, sir.”

“How far away?”

“Matter of twenty yards, sometimes.”

“Nobody ever been sick in your place outside?”

“Not as I know of, sir.”

“Think, my good chap.”

“Well, I’d have to clean it up, and I never have, sir.”

“That’s that, then,” said Stallard, disgruntled. He did not consult the timid ladies, who, in his expression, “alibied each other.”

• CHAPTER 6 •

A glass serpent: Syrian.
Description of a Gentile Syrian glass figure, probably of the fourth century A.D.

• 1 •

"I want the car, George," said Mrs. Bradley. "Sally is mixed up in a murder."

"The car, Madam," said George, respectfully, "is temporarily out of commission. I having unsuccessfully attempted an assault on the civic conscience of Mr. Thorp at the filling-station with regard to the rationing of petrol."

"Don't be annoying, George," said his employer, going indoors to look up a suitable train. George saluted, stood looking at her retreating back, and then strolled off towards the village, collecting, on his way, Henri from the kitchen and the knife and boot boy from Mrs. Bradley's small orchard.

At the crossroads, where four lanes met, stood the village smithy, now used as a fire-fighting post. Seven volunteers and an ancient car normally comprised the auxiliary fire brigade and its equipment, but seven steel helmets hanging side by side along the wall of the wooden shed testified to the fact that the personnel were taking their mid-morning refreshment at the village inn.

Beside the car stood the ambulance, a converted single-deck omnibus. George looked at his watch. The time was ten past eleven. The fire-fighters, he deduced, would be absent from their posts for at least another twenty minutes.

He took off his neat peaked cap and exchanged for it one of the steel helmets. Sufficiently camouflaged if anybody passed that way, he began to milk the tank of the motor-bus into certain empty petrol tins upon which the

fire-fighters were wont to sit during their hours of duty. This questionable occupation over, he replaced the steel helmet on its nail and his own cap on his head, signed to his satellites to pick up two cans each, and picked up the remaining two himself.

Then he set the cans down again, tore a leaf from his memo-pad, took out a pencil, licked it, looked appraisingly at the seven steel helmets hanging in a row on the wall, and, grinning, wrote on the paper, *Love from Snow-White*.

• 2 •

"You see, Adela, Sally is glad to be doing her bit."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Bradley. Her handsome sister-in-law looked across the fireplace with justifiable irritation in her glance. It was poor Charles Lestrange's amiable weakness to have loved and cherished the lizard-like relict which faced her from the opposite side of the hearth, but Lady Selina had never approved her brother's choice of a wife, any more than she approved of the deep affection of her daughter Sally for this oddly saurian aunt.

"What do you mean…why?" she enquired. "I should have thought that in war-time we should all do what we can. I myself am a warden."

"Yes, so George told me. I congratulate you, Selina."

"George?"

"My chauffeur. He's a warden, too. You ought to get together."

Lady Selina snorted. Sally, curled up on a cushioned window-seat, giggled.

"Go out of the room, Sally," said her mother, "I have to speak to Aunt Adela quite privately."

"All right, Mother. I'll go and dig out Pat. Aunt Adela will want to interview Pat."

"I can't think where Sally picks up such odd friends," Lady Selina continued. "But never mind that now."

Mrs. Bradley, who did not mind it, either then or at any other time, sat even more upright in her comfortable arm-chair, smiled—an expression of goodwill which always made her sister-in-law feel suspicious and slightly uncomfortable—and nodded slowly and pleasantly.

“The point is,” continued Lady Selina, coming to it with a mother’s bluntness, “that Sally is to be kept out of the law-courts. There has, of course, been an inquest. She was compelled to attend it. Later, there may be a trial for murder. Under no circumstances whatever will I permit Sally’s name to appear in connection with anything so unspeakably sordid.”

“But won’t she be disappointed?” asked Mrs. Bradley. Lady Selina wisely ignored this unreasonable contribution to the discussion.

“If anybody can do anything about clearing up the whole matter and bringing it in as suicide or something even remotely respectable, it is you,” she continued, “it is your duty to the family. And, after all, there have been two other murders in the neighbourhood. At least, there have been inquests, and it all seems to be very unpleasant.”

“‘I have answered three questions, and that is enough,’” quoted Mrs. Bradley under her breath.

“Adela!” said Lady Selina, thoroughly exasperated. Mrs. Bradley got up.

“Is Pat the reporter?” she asked.

“Yes. Why?”

“I think I’ll take Sally’s advice and go and talk to her.”

“Her name is Mort—Patricia Mort. The newspaper office is in the High Street in Willington. Then you are prepared to do something? I’m so glad.”

“I don’t know. What is it you want me to do? Suppress the facts that there are, or create evidence that there is not? Both, I believe, are criminal offences.”

She grinned evilly at her relative by marriage and walked briskly out, leaving behind her in the one arm-chair her knitting—a Balaclava helmet which mortified her fondness for crude tints by being of that uninteresting mud-coloured shade known to civilisation as khaki—and in the other an outraged sister-in-law.

“George,” she said, appearing at the garage doors, “how much petrol have we?”

“Enough to get home with, madam, just about. But Ernest is under the impression”—he drew forward a bashful, freckled village lad in chauffeur’s breeches and leggings—“that as Lady Selina has taken to her bicycle for the duration, there wouldn’t be any harm done, if you take my meaning…?”

“A couple of gallon, ma’am, wouldn’t be here nor there,” put in the bashful one, modestly measuring Mrs. Bradley up as good for the cost of the petrol plus a two-shilling piece, and proving, to his own satisfaction, to have estimated sixpence short of the actual amount he received.

Mrs. Bradley cackled at his thanks, and told George to drive into Willington. She never gave two-shilling pieces as tips, because her favourite son (not Ferdinand) had, as a schoolboy, impressed upon her that the florin was not a gentleman’s coin. A similar objection on his part had resulted in more formal presents of money being rendered him in guineas, not pounds.

It was not far to Willington. Sally, who had been compelled, by her mother’s wish, to give up her little two-seater, always paid fourpence on the bus. The actual distance was about three hundred yards more than the fourpenny fare, but Sally always gave fourpence, and had not yet been asked for the other penny.

“I can’t afford fivepence,” was the unanswerable objection she had made to her mother, when Lady Selina, shocked by the disclosure, had remonstrated about it. “They’ve no right to charge at all, really. After all, I’m on Government service.”

The offices of the *Willington and District County Record* were in the High Street, as Lady Selina had indicated.

“I don’t know how long you can park here, George,” said his employer. “I may be gone some time.”

“I’ll find somewhere, madam,” said George.

The old town lay along two main roads, one running east and west, the other branching south from almost opposite the Town Hall. To the north there was a new housing estate, and farther east, but still to the north, a winding road (once a long and twisting lane) which climbed a hill into the country, and eventually crossed seven miles of common before it found the next village.

The poorer part of the town lay farther west and south of the Broadway in which Mrs. Bradley found herself when she got out of the car. She was now in the shopping centre. Opposite the newspaper office was a large bookshop, and on either side of that were, respectively, a restaurant and a jeweller’s shop. Flanking these again were a wine-merchant’s and an old-established draper’s, and across a narrow side-street opposite the draper’s was a church, a handsome Victorian-Gothic building with green

lawns and gravel paths, and, behind it, still in the same neat, spacious grounds, a comfortable late Victorian vicarage and a school.

Mrs. Bradley looked up and down the main street with interest and curiosity. This was, she thought, of all the prosperous towns she had ever seen, the least likely from its appearance to be the scene of three violent deaths.

The deaths had been, as it were, topical, and their aftermath had been too spectacular to be in keeping with such a town. An occasional gas suicide, an open verdict following a fall from a second-floor window, an absconding trustee or so, some naughty boys had up for stealing apples or bicycles, a road-hog now and again, and a boy and girl suicide pact—these might have been in keeping with the place, she thought, and ought to have kept its local paper in headlines for twenty years. Instead of that, in the first two months of the war—as though reports of schools closed, children sent into the country, and descriptions (with photographs) of the new public air raid shelters, were not enough to give the paper that extra fillip which the times appeared to require—there must be a Council member poisoned with arsenic. And then, as though his death in itself were not enough to make the fortune of the proprietors of the paper, and the professional reputations of every member of its staff, there had followed the sensational discovery of his body propped up in a doorway near the local cinema; this in addition to the discovery of another body, that of an unknown woman, in the municipal A.R.P. cistern in an obscure cul-de-sac at the western end of the town. Then, 'overdoing it,' said Mrs. Bradley to herself (an almost exact echo of the words of the inspector of police, although she did not know this until later) there was also this apparently motiveless murder of the red-haired telephonist at the Town Hall Report Centre.

Shaking her head, she opened the street door and went into the ground floor office of the newspaper. A short, stout man, wearing a felt hat on the back of his head, sat behind a counter. He took no notice of her at first, but continued to enter figures in a cashbook.

"Photograph?" he said at last, but without troubling himself to look up. "Further along the counter."

"No. I want to see one of the reporters."

"Complaints by letter only," said the man, reaching for an ink-eraser.

"Will you take my card to the editor, please?" said Mrs. Bradley patiently. "I want to see Miss Patricia Mort."

At this name the man ceased writing, and even raised his eyes for a second.

"She's with Mr. Eves," he said. "She won't see you. She's a bit exclusive these days, after the murders. We all are here. Busy, too."

"I have come about the murders. Please take my card to the editor."

The man looked up again.

"Bless you," he said, "cards don't mean nothing to him." He settled again to his work. Mrs. Bradley deflated but not defeated, walked out of the *Record* office and went to the police station.

A large, painstaking sergeant of police was seated at a desk writing somewhat laboriously in a book which looked like a ledger. He took no notice of her arrival, so she seated herself on a bench at the side of the room, rested her back against the wall, and took out a piece of knitting—this time a sea-boot stocking.

The clicking of her needles soon had the effect up the sergeant which she had hoped for. Looking up, he scowled and asked:

"What can we do for you?"

"You can tell the inspector in charge of the murder of the girl telephonist that I should like to see him."

"Connected with the crime?"

"I am not, personally, connected with the crime, if crime it was," Mrs. Bradley chattily commenced, "but, all the same, if you…"

She paused. The sergeant had picked up the desk telephone and was bellowing earnestly into it.

"Up them stairs and first on the right," he said, glowering, "and don't go telling him fairy tales. He's heard three confessions already to-day, from ladies about like you."

"Sergeant," said Mrs. Bradley solemnly, "when I die your lacerating observations will be found scratched upon my heart. Ladies about like me, indeed! What next, I should like to know?"

The sergeant stared at her, shook his head significantly, and resumed his penmanship. Mrs. Bradley walked through a doorway, mounted a staircase, knocked at the first door on the right, and was admitted.

The inspector was a large, rather shapeless young man who offered her a chair and hovered uncertainly over her like a friendly mastiff with a frog. He knew her name—that was obvious—and Mrs. Bradley suspected that he had received the tidings from Sally that Lady Selina had called her in.

Mrs. Bradley observed:

"And to what, child, do you owe the honour of this visit?"

"Yes, to what?" said Stallard smiling, and removing himself to his desk. He took up a pencil and drew towards him a pad.

"First," said Mrs. Bradley, "curiosity. I like what I hear of your murders, Inspector. I consider that they do the town credit."

"Yes, they do, don't they? And they've lost nothing in the writing up, believe me. The local paper has had the time of its life, to say nothing of the big dailies, every one of which has sent down a special reporter; not to speak of the 'special articles' out of which our local reporter must be making a fortune. Yes, we've made news here, at last. In fact, like George Joseph Smith, we've 'eclipsed the European war.' But, seriously, it's becoming rather complicated. You see, in the one case only, that of Councillor Smith, do we seem to have anything to go on. A man like that may have enemies. He was a magistrate as well as a Councillor, and, although you might not think it, we've got some tough spots in Willington, particularly down by the canal. Then…well, he had relatives with expectations. Nothing has turned up yet, but I have distinct hopes, or had, near the beginning, that we should hit a trail reasonably soon.

"But then, there is this unaccountable affair of the woman found dead in the A.R.P. tank by those kids. Apart from the fact that it's not a place where anybody sane would choose to commit suicide, there are features which are holding us up not a little, notably the fact that we can't get the body identified. Yet it doesn't seem to have been the body of a vagrant. The only thing we can think of—most unpopular in the town, by the way—is that she must have been the inmate of a lunatic asylum, of which we've got two, in or near the district, a private institution which I've decided to keep an eye on, and a County Mental Hospital, about three miles off at Winborough.

"We've interviewed people from both places, but both deny that she was ever a patient of theirs."

"I suppose it was suicide?" Mrs. Bradley enquired.

"Well, we don't think so, altogether. The cases have this much in common: that in two the victims had taken arsenic. It was enough to kill Councillor Smith, but, according to the medical evidence, there was no trace of arsenic in the organs of either of the women. One had been sick

with it, however. They had been finished off by being the one drowned and the other hit over the head with a big stone out of a rockery."

"And no motive, so far, has come to light at all in the case of the telephonist?"

"Well, on the face of it, no. The girl, whose name was Fletcher, was an unassuming, harmless girl enough; her people have lived here for years. She had a fiancé, and it's true they'd had a quarrel, but, apart from the fact that it wasn't enough to hang a murder on, the lad has a pretty good alibi, and I believe he had nothing at all to do with her death. She had no shady friends, either, and there seem to have been no peculiar goings-on—you know the sort of thing I mean. Nothing to make a young fellow think she'd be better out of his way. I can't make anything of it. We think the poison she took must have been dropped into her coffee at the Report Centre, but there, again, we come to a dead end. There was nobody there who could possibly have wished her harm. We've put the whole boiling through it, and every one of them came clean. In any case, there's the mysterious fact that the body showed no evidence of poison, but the vomit did. She was killed by the knock on the head."

"Finger-prints? Bloodstains?"

"Not a thing. Stone had blood—Miss Fletcher's blood—but no prints. Still, every cinema-goer nowadays knows that you shove on gloves before handling the thing you're going to kill with. This town is full of boneheads whose second home is the pictures."

"Yes, I see. Of course, it's in connection with Lillie Fletcher that I am here."

"Oh, yes, I understand that. Lady Selina, of course. I know she doesn't like it, but what can I do? For all I know, Miss Sally Lestrange might turn out to be a material witness at the trial—if we ever get as far as a trial. I can't just let her slip out of it."

"Of course you can't, child. I am not here," said Mrs. Bradley, with a grin which, although evil, was heartening, "as the ambassador of Lady Selina. If my niece is mixed up in a murder, as her mother felicitously puts it, she must accept the consequences, like anybody else. I have come merely to suggest that an old woman might be permitted to peer and pry into your very interesting affairs."

"You don't mean you'll help us in the investigation, Mrs. Bradley?"

"I love ferreting," said Mrs. Bradley simply, "and I have always possessed the insatiable curiosity of the Elephant's Child with, so far, no catastrophic results to myself. There are features of interest here which I cannot ignore. May I take it that the police will place no serious obstacles in the way of my researches?"

"Oh, we'll leave you alone all right," said the young man, getting up. "If you want any facilities, ask for them. Only too glad to have you."

"What a thing it is," said Mrs. Bradley, "to possess the right of the high, the low and the middle justice! Very well, Inspector. I go now to call upon the first of my material witnesses, the young journalist who was present with Sally at the Report Centre when Miss Fletcher was killed. I presume that the poison was in the coffee, and not in one of the cocktails which, my niece informs me, the poor girl drank at home before she reported for duty?"

"We're inclined to think the coffee, but arsenic takes longer to act on some people than on others. Of course, we're not too sure about the woman who was drowned. That's a funny case altogether. Still, it seems certain that all three deaths took place within twelve hours of one another. If so, and if my theory's right, and the same chap did them all in, he must have had a pretty busy evening."

"All on the same day," said Mrs. Bradley, thoughtfully. "And, you suspect, in the same twelve hours. A busy evening indeed. And now," she added, more briskly, "I have to find some way of interviewing the people at the office of the local paper. I have tried once to approach the editor, and, through him, the young reporter who was present with Sally at the Report Centre when the telephonist was killed; but I was foiled by a man in shirt sleeves."

"That would be Buckley. Stout fellow, Buckley, but got it up his nose, rather, about the increased circulation of the paper, you know. Makes him very snooty. You'd be surprised."

"I shouldn't. I have just had direct evidence of his snootiness."

"Take my card in with you."

"Cards," said Mrs. Bradley, "mean nothing to the editor of the *Record*. No, I must get in off my own bat. I think of my sister-in-law, and I realise that she would assert herself. I cannot see any man in shirt sleeves keeping Selina away from the editor if she thought it desirable to interview him."

"Why are you so keen on seeing the editor?"

"I want to get hold of a set of files of the paper for the past five years or so. But, most of all, I want to see Miss Mort. With her journalistic sense, she may have noticed things at the Report Centre that night which Sally missed."

She walked back to the newspaper office and went in again.

"Where did you say I could find Miss Mort?" she said. Mr. Buckley had finished his writing, and was now turning over the contents of a box file.

"Eh?" he said, "Oh, it's you. The editor won't see anybody. That's honest."

"My name is Bradley—Lestrange Bradley," said Mrs. Bradley benignly. "Take my card to the editor at once. I'm in a hurry."

"You can go up without bothering about cards," said Mr. Buckley. "Besides, as I keep on saying, he wouldn't see you. Pat might. What name did you say?"

"Bradley," said Mrs. Bradley. "Pray read it. It is all on the card."

"Bradley?" He tipped his hat farther backwards and looked at the card which at last she had induced him to take. "Bradley? Now where on earth—I get it! So you're in it too, then, are you? My word, I can tell you," he added, straightening his back, and then his hat, and becoming suddenly animated and pleasant, "it hasn't half been a scoop for the *Record*! Got it long before the big London dailies. All due to Pat, you might say. Got a flair, that girl has! The boss and Mr. Eves have run seven Special Editions and a Digest since we first got the dope about Councillor Blackburn-Smith. Of course, the other two corpses don't really matter so much. Smith was the big nose here, although the London papers seemed keener on that girl Fletcher. The A.R.P. tank corpse was only good for the Sunday papers really, but, boy! Would you say they ate it? Anyway, we printed every word young Pat could give us. Interviews with the people that found the other bodies, and a special article, Is it another ripper? Three we've had, you know. Three murders. Special interview with young Lillie Fletcher's fiancé, photographed in his fire-fighting uniform; special interview with Miss Lestrange, daughter of Lady Selina Lestrange. That's funny!" He glanced at the card in his hand. "No relation, I suppose?"

"Why should you suppose that?" Mrs. Bradley enquired. She shot such an evil grin at him, and her expression held so much malignity, that he

reached for the house-telephone and stated her name and business without more ado, in a husky voice unlike his previous pronouncements.

"Go up, will you?" he said. "Second floor. Mind your head at the bend in the stairs."

• CHAPTER 7 •

Telemachus is hurled into the sea by Mentor: the burning ship is seen on the extreme right.
Description by Ewart Dudley of part of an early pictorial wall-paper.

"I don't know what you want me to tell you," said the tall, fair-skinned young reporter, looking with great interest at Mrs. Bradley. "I could take you along, and show you where we found the poor girl, but it wouldn't help much, would it? I mean, the police can do all that part; in fact, I think they have."

"What is your share in all this, Sally, my child?" asked Mrs. Bradley. Her niece, who was sitting by the window gazing sombrely into the street, turned her head. She was pale, Mrs. Bradley noticed, and looked fatigued.

"Me? Oh, I was with Pat when we found her. I think you ought to interview her young man. That's what the police keep doing, only he seems to have an alibi. At least, the other men back him up, and say he was with them all the time, and he says he doesn't know of anybody who disliked the girl enough to kill her. But then, men will say anything. They know awfully little about girls."

Mrs. Bradley studied her niece closely. Sally flushed and then grinned. Pat, looking first at one of them and then at the other, laughed aloud.

"Shall I take you to the Report Centre?" she enquired.

"By all means, child," Mrs. Bradley responded. "if you can spare the time. Did either of you know the girl well?"

"Sally didn't know her at all. I interviewed her father once. He's a postman, and he grew the biggest vegetable marrow last year for the Show, so I was sent along by my editor."

"Where does he live?"

"The postman? In Clarence Avenue. He has the house on a mortgage and pays the Council so much every month at five and a quarter per cent. It

will take him another eight years to get the money paid off. The Council arranges for fifteen years, and he's been there seven years last July. He moved in, in his summer holiday."

"This information is what he gave you when you interviewed him, I take it?"

"Yes. I've a pretty good memory. I very seldom take notes. Come along, Sally. If Sir Ferdinand is there, you can get us in. They're strict about having strangers in the Report Centre," she added, for Mrs. Bradley's information. The road was a busy one, but the narrow concrete-paved alley up which they turned at the end of the first block of shops was quiet and deserted, and their footfalls rang hollow as they traversed it.

"We can't go through the Report Centre unless we've got business there," explained Pat again, walking ahead and speaking over her shoulder, "but we can get round this way if you don't mind a bit of a squash, and then Sally can round up Sir Ferdinand if you want to go inside later on."

The narrowest place came just at the angle of the building, round which, it was clear, the architect had not intended that people should find room to walk.

The three of them managed to squeeze past, and when they had done so they found themselves in a kind of gravelled courtyard surrounded on three sides by municipal buildings. Yellow and copper-coloured leaves were in little heaps on the ground, as though eddying water rather than wind had whirled them where they lay. The trees from which they had fallen, not yet bare, stood, with the depressing, disciplined tidiness of nearly all municipal vegetation. in two rows at right-angles to one another, the one row screening the Town Hall stokehold, the other the Public Baths.

"It was here," said Pat, moving forward to the rockery.

"I see," said Mrs. Bradley. "And that gate?" She pointed to double doors wide enough to admit a lorry. They were at the western end of the stokehold wall which adjoined the Town Hall annexe.

"Leads past the Baths laundry and on to a side road. Across the road is the Auxiliary Fire Station, where Fletcher's boy was on duty the night she was killed, and about a quarter of a mile farther down the main road is the Fire Station itself. I don't think there's any connection between them, if you know what I mean. The auxiliary one is just simply A.R.P."

"I see," said Mrs. Bradley again, leading the way to the hole at the top of the rockery. "How long did the doctor think that the poor girl had been

dead?"

"I don't know, because the inquest was adjourned."

"Surely they took the medical evidence?"

"Did they? The inspector would know. It couldn't have been long, though, could it?"

"Where was the girl employed?"

"Only here, at the Report Centre."

"And where, before the war?"

"At the telephone exchange. It's in Esk Avenue, the north past of the town."

"Did she leave voluntarily?"

"I suppose so. I really don't know. I suppose she thought she ought to do some A.R.P. work, that's all. But perhaps I ought to tell you that there had been some funny business—we didn't print anything—and, actually, I myself didn't cover the case—but apparently it was all rather scandalous."

"Local scandal?"

"Oh, yes. I don't know much about it—practically nothing, in fact—but Mrs. Commy-Platt would know. She ran the Through Breath to Beauty group, where it all started, and, of course, Lillie Fletcher was her companion-secretary at the time."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. I wish," added Pat ingenuously, "that you would find out all about it. I must say I'd love to know."

Mrs. Bradley cackled.

"Where does Mrs. Commy-Platt live?" she enquired, looking earnestly at the Town Hall clock, which could be seen above the adjacent buildings, and then glancing down at her watch.

"In one of those big houses in Esk Avenue."

"Where the telephone exchange is, at which this poor girl was employed? Esk Avenue seems to be notorious."

"Oh, no, really, it isn't! It's a most respectable part of the town," said Pat, alarmed. "And you mustn't think that there's anything odd at all about Mrs. Platt, because there isn't. She's just…well, you know what some of the leisured people in provincial towns are like! But, really, I'm sure she's quite nice."

"I am glad to hear it. Conduct me to Mrs. Platt, child. She seems to be our line of approach to Lillie Fletcher."

"I'm not coming, then," said Sally. "I promised mother that, whatever happened, I should be home to lunch. Ferdinand is coming," she added; but whether this last sentence was intended as an inducement to Ferdinand's mother to join the party, or as a threat to keep her away from it, Mrs. Bradley could not decide. She turned to the young reporter.

"Would you like your lunch, child?"

"Yes," said Pat, with simple candour. "Thank you very much."

"Very well. By the way, was there very much blood on the sides of this rockery?"

"No. I expect it washed out in the rain. It was fearfully wet, on and off, if you remember. The stone was pretty bloody, I believe, but, of course, the messy side was against the ground, and the rain didn't very much affect it."

Mrs. Bradley, always charmed by the society of the young, then carted her off to the "Dragon" and sent the pot-boy, whom she discovered teasing the garage cat, to look for George and tell him to get his lunch. She had her own methods of description, and the pot-boy discovered George without difficulty.

"And now," said Mrs. Bradley, removing a scarf in peculiarly repulsive shades of oyster, dusty pink and what used to be called, in children's paint-boxes, green bice, "what shall we have?"

It was a pleasant meal. Mrs. Bradley finished up with cheese, which Pat declined, and Pat with a cigarette. Both had coffee, the worst part of the meal (but not as bad, Mrs. Bradley observed, as she had drunk in Alsace-Lorraine), and then they began to talk.

"First," said Mrs. Bradley, knowing how extremely difficult it is for the female young, with the memory of their schooldays still upon them, to avoid answering a direct question, "what is the matter with Sally?"

"Oh, well…is there anything?" asked Pat, hedging bravely. Mrs. Bradley said nothing, but waited, her black eyes fixed on Pat's face, and a slight smile, sensed rather than seen, at the corners of her beaky little mouth. Pat, a few years previously, would have wriggled beneath the gaze. The dignity of twenty summers (she had been born in June) forbade that primitive reaction to acute mental discomfort, but she flushed a little, the blush showing clearly under the very fair skin, and said hesitatingly:

"Well, you're her aunt, and she likes you. She's in love, I think."

"With the inspector in charge of the case?" asked Mrs. Bradley, who had a shrewd and happy appreciation of her niece's instinctive behaviour.

"She's told you?"

"No, child."

"How do you know? Surely, Lady Selina…?"

Mrs. Bradley shook her head, and grinned.

"And I suppose these cases are most unsatisfactory," she remarked. "Has he tackled a murder before?"

"He's a Hendon boy," observed Pat, as though she were explaining away some rather embarrassing point in connection with the affair.

"All the same," Mrs. Bradley solemnly subjoined, "I don't think Selina would like it. What has gone wrong with the case?"

"He says the other corpses are connected, and nobody else thinks they are."

"The body in the tank and the murdered Councillor?"

"Yes. Have you read them up? Personally, I think he's quite right, and I'd like to say so in the paper. In fact, I did say so in my column last week, only my editor pencilled it out, and said we should be had up for malicious libel or contempt of court or something. But he's only scared because, as you say, one of the corpses was a Town Councillor. Someone poisoned him, and then propped him up in a doorway in the black-out, and he was found by two people who were waiting for a bus to take them home from the pictures. Ronald tried to put it on to them, the silly ass!"

"And how long had the Councillor been dead?"

"Well, he was stiff. So stiff that he fell down flat when the young man touched him. But the doctors didn't seem anxious to commit themselves as to the time of death. He had a funny inside or something, and they think perhaps it might have made a difference."

"Oh, had he?" said Mrs. Bradley. "Who was his doctor?"

"Doctor Forrest. He lives in Mount Park Avenue. But, of course, it was the police doctor who was first upon the scene when the body was found."

"And the other corpse?"

"The other corpse? Well, that really is a mystery. The body hasn't been identified."

"Oh?"

"No. The body in the tank, you know. She was about fifty, they think. She was drowned all right, and she hadn't taken arsenic, whereas Councillor Smith and Lillie Fletcher both had."

“Very interesting indeed. And nobody knows anything about her, except that she wasn’t dressed in her own clothes. How did the inspector know that?”

“I believe the things she had on have been recognised and identified as some which once belonged to Mrs. Commy-Platt. Mrs. Platt belongs to all sorts of charitable organisations, and she gives away her old clothes to some of them. But I don’t see how you knew they weren’t the woman’s own clothes, and in any case it was only a night-gown and a pair of pink flannel drawers.”

“Mrs. Commy-Platt is vaguely reminiscent of Mr. Godfrey Ablewhite, is she not? I think I shall be interested in meeting Mrs. Platt. Let us see whether we can induce the waiter to produce the bill,” said Mrs. Bradley, ignoring, except with a grin, the tribute to her perspicacity.

“It’s a fairly long way from here,” said Pat, as they came out into the street. She surveyed her companion’s small and apparently frail figure. “Wouldn’t you like a bus, or perhaps your car, if you’ve any petrol?”

“How far?”

“A mile and a half, I should think. And most of it uphill.”

“Can you walk a mile and a half uphill?” Pat laughed, and they crossed the High Street, took a narrow turning which the girl promised was a short cut, and soon came out upon a small common on which a few seats had been erected at public expense and a printed notice put up on a bright green post. A narrow path, discreetly asphalted, led to the other side of the open space, and then came a gradually mounting, winding road, cut through what seemed to have been woodland, for there were forest trees, including oaks and pines, in the gardens of all the houses.

“Mrs. Platt lives almost at the top. There’s a wonderful view,” said Pat, “from her upstairs windows. I stayed the night once, two years ago, when it was terribly foggy. I had gone to interview her about the portrait of her father which she was presenting to the Town Hall for the Watch Committee Jubilee, and she wouldn’t hear of my trying to get back to my digs. Said it might be dangerous, and anyway would take me hours.”

“And what is your candid opinion of Mrs. Platt?”

“I think she’s just a well-meaning old busybody, really. Of course, she thinks she owns the town, and she’s so well-off and such a difficult person to sort of sit on, that everybody lets her go on thinking so. Here’s the telephone exchange, where the poor girl Fletcher used to be employed.”

Beyond giving it a passing glance, Mrs. Bradley evinced no interest in the telephone exchange, and they wound on up the hill between the pines.

• CHAPTER 8 •

Midday: Ruins of a Temple.
Title of a painting by Francis Oliver Finch.

Mrs. Commy-Platt was of medium height and, like Oliver Surface, of a damned disinheriting countenance. She was spare, severe, and formal, and at first she received Mrs. Bradley not personally, but through the agency of her lady's-maid-companion, who rejoiced (but not obviously, since she was a sour-faced, sniffing creature with eyes which looked like marbles) in the romantic name of Isabella.

"Mrs. Platt cannot see anybody until after she has had her afternoon lay-down," pronounced this apparition, regarding Mrs. Bradley with acute dislike.

"In that case," said Mrs. Bradley, "she will receive a communication from my solicitors."

"Your…I beg your pardon, but did you say…?"

"I did. Good afternoon. You may inform Mrs. Platt, if you like, that I have been advised I have a cast-iron case."

She turned and began to walk away. A few moments later—before she and Pat had reached the gate of the long garden, in fact—Isabella came hastening after them.

"Mrs. Commy-Platt will forgo her afternoon lay-down for once, if you will kindly return and explain yourself and message."

So Mrs. Bradley retraced her steps, leaving Pat to please herself whether she accompanied her or not. Pat, reporter-like, decided to stay, and together they reached the front door.

"This way, please."

"Mind you don't trip over the tiger's head," muttered Pat, as they were led down a long hall, linoleum-covered to represent brick tiles and decorated with various trophies of fishing and the chase. Mrs. Bradley, who

had already seen the tiger's head which was attached to a large skin rug, avoided it and followed Isabella up some stairs. On the first-floor landing was a door with a brass knocker representing the head of a Pekinese dog. Isabella tapped the chin of the dog on to its neck, and a querulous voice, imperiously pitched, dared rather than invited them to enter.

"Mrs. Bradley, my lady," said Isabella.

Mrs. Bradley raised her eyebrows at Pat, who grinned and slightly shook her head. Apparently the nominative of address was the result of the same process of instinctive snobbery as the custom in the United States of America of giving a boy the first name of Earl.

Mrs. Platt did not rise to greet her visitors, but motioned them to take seats.

"You I know," she observed, looking at Pat.

"Yes, Mrs. Platt."

"Commy-Platt."

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Commy-Platt."

The owner of Willington smiled sourly, and then turned on Mrs. Bradley a questioning and forbidding glare.

"And to what am I indebted?" she asked, apparently under the impression that she had completed her sentence.

"I beg your pardon?" said Mrs. Bradley.

"This visit. Do you wish to see me about anything of importance?"

"Yes. I think perhaps you may be able to help me in tracing some clothing which you were kind enough to give away in the town some time ago."

"Clothing? But my maid said you were threatening me with a law-suit."

"Did she?"

"Perhaps you will explain!"

"No, no. It is you who must explain, Mrs. Platt. I am advised that some clothing found on a murdered person came originally from this house and from your wardrobe, and I must ask you to account for that fact."

Regardless of Mrs. Platt's expression of horrified amazement, she drew from a capacious skirt-pocket a notebook and a fountain-pen, and looked expectantly at her victim.

"But…but…but I never heard anything so preposterous in my life!" said Mrs. Platt.

"You deny, then, that the clothing originally came from here?"

"No, of course I don't! But that has nothing whatever to do with…"

Mrs. Bradley put up a thin hand.

"Please," she said, "We shall achieve nothing by a show of violence and ill-humour. *Lentement poliment, et en francais*—although we may perhaps excuse you the last. Mrs. Platt, I am investigating a case of murder—three cases of murder—and I warn you not to attempt to obstruct me in the execution of my duty."

"But…your credentials," wailed Mrs. Commy-Platt, deflated by these gangster tactics. "I don't know anything about you."

"You know Miss Mort."

"Oh…yes."

"You know the inspector in charge of the case?"

"He…yes."

"You know Lady Selina Lestrange?"

"Lady Selina? Oh!"

"And Sir Ferdinand Lestrange, her nephew?"

"I…I haven't the pleasure…"

"It is a pleasure in store—I hope! It depends, of course, whether you are called for the defence or for the prosecution. Ferdinand in court is ruthless; utterly ruthless."

"Ferdinand?"

"He is my son. Now, Mrs. Platt, come along. There is nothing to be afraid of, so long as you tell me the truth."

This last master-stroke of impudence caused the collapse of Mrs. Platt's already severely undermined morale. She was a spent force from then onward, so far as Mrs. Bradley was concerned.

"Go outside, Isabella," she said, "and don't listen. Go and play the piano so that I can just hear you. Not loudly, mind. My nerves won't stand loud playing."

"Very well, Mrs. Platt," observed Isabella, who had not dared, for years, to address her employer other than as 'my lady,' or to refer to her, in or out of her presence, except by her full name of Commy-Platt. She would pay for her temerity later, Mrs. Bradley concluded, watching her departure with a bright, basilisk eye.

"Now, Pat, take shorthand notes," she said, "We must have this part of the evidence complete and correct. Mrs. Platt, no doubt, will sign a

statement later, should that become necessary. That will not be to-day, Mrs. Platt," she added, beaming with horrid tolerance upon her fish-mouthed victim. "Now, then, where shall we begin?"

Mrs. Platt seemed unwilling to make any suggestion by way of reply to this question, and Mrs. Bradley, in any case, gave her very little opportunity to do so, for she continued, almost immediately:

"Tell me, Mrs. Platt, about your arrangements for giving away cast-off clothing. Did somebody call here to make a collection? Did your maid parcel up the clothing and direct it to some central agency? Did you work on a large scale (with a committee, for example), or was it a private and personal charity of your own?"

"I used to investigate the necessitous cases myself," Mrs. Platt replied, recovering a little of her poise and self-command. "Naturally I used to rely upon various organisations to report to me cases of special hardship among the poor of the town, but I always undertook the distribution of the clothing and other necessaries personally."

"I see. You liked the poor of the town to know and love their benefactor, no doubt."

Mrs. Platt glanced sharply at her, unable to ignore the implication of the words. She was, however, equally unable to discern any trace of sarcasm or irony in Mrs. Bradley's benign gaze. She assented, shortly, therefore, and added:

"As for the clothing you seem to refer to, I cannot account for the fact that it was found on any unknown woman except by saying that the woman to whom I gave the clothes must have sold them."

"Very ungrateful of her. You cannot, of course, Mrs. Platt, recollect to whom you gave them?"

"I could not say. Of course, I have lists of the people—my people, as I like to call them, but—no, I couldn't say. Besides, I don't even admit that it was my cast-off clothing. I am not at all sure that I have ever given away night-attire, either! It would be different if the…the poor creature had been wearing one of my dresses. But underclothing—and of such a nature—no. Even as to the rest of the clothes, I see no way of tracing them. Besides, for all we know, they may have been sold and resold. You know how these people live."

"I wonder whether you would be good enough to let me have a copy of your list of grateful pensioners, Mrs. Platt?"

Mrs. Platt again looked up suspiciously, and again was foiled by Mrs. Bradley's serene, unfocused gaze.

"Isabella can make one out, I suppose," she said ungraciously. "Although how the police think it's going to help, I'm sure I can't see. If the woman were known, of course, it would be easy enough for me to say whether she was on my list or not, but as it is…"

"Quite. Quite. Quite. Quite," said Mrs. Bradley. "Well, Mrs. Platt, I must thank you for your information, and apologise for taking up your time. I hope you will enjoy a pleasant afternoon nap."

She got up, to the relief of Mrs. Platt who wailed for Isabella to return, and took her leave.

"And now," she said, as they were passing the telephone exchange on their return journey, "is there any record of any clothing, not on a body, having been found in the town or near it?"

The young reporter looked startled.

"You mean the other night-gown?" she observed. "Oh, but that was identified, you know. It blew off the line at the Infirmary, and ended up in a heap outside Dewey's, the fishmonger's in Parrybit Lane."

Mrs. Bradley, who had not heard of this second night-gown before, grimaced in an oddly satisfied manner, and did not pursue the subject. She parted from Pat at the editorial office, walked across to a stationer's shop, and purchased an Ordnance Survey map of the district and a street-plan of the town. Thus armed, she directed her steps towards Parrybit Lane. A long and gently sloping road, tree-bordered and lined by houses which belonged to a genteel period when motor-cars were fewer and families a good deal larger, led her to the lane.

It might have been once a pleasant thoroughfare, but, if so, its character had entirely altered. It was narrow enough, that was certain, and it was now a poor-class shopping district of the kind where the fried-fish shop props up the off-licence, and the dominating buildings are the pubs.

Mrs. Bradley soon found the fishmonger's shop she was in search of. The day was Wednesday, and the shop was shut.

• CHAPTER 9 •

The Feast of the River-Gods.
Title of a painting of the school of Rubens or Jordaens.

Although the shop was closed, Mr. Dewey, Christian names Edmond Clarence, and his two sons, Mr. Eldred Wenceslas Dewey and Mr. Conrad Voight Dewey, were busy in the outhouse inspecting, filleting, rejecting, gutting, washing, decapitating, blessing, cursing, and pricing fish, ready for the next day's sale…or so it seemed to Mrs. Bradley when, her first ring at the bell failing to obtain an answer, she pressed again, and, with apologies for disturbing the peace, was admitted by the proprietor, who appeared to be pleased to see her.

"Night-gown?" he said, with an appreciative chuckle. Ah, not 'arf. Come from Mrs. Platt? Sez you!"

Mrs. Bradley assured him that she had come from Mrs. Platt. The fishmonger, still grinning, wiped his fish-scaled hands on his apron, invited his sons to carry on and to leave plenty of skate for frying, and invited her to go into the parlour. Here he produced beer, without the aid of which, he informed her, he was unable to do his tale full justice, poured some out very carefully, closing one eye as he did so, into a large mug ornamented by a fancifully-executed, highly-coloured crab and further embellished by lettering (some of which had disappeared in the washing-up of the utensil), and then, opening the closed eye, he cocked it at Mrs. Bradley.

"Thank you," she replied. Mr. Dewey, in the most hospitable fashion, brought out a second mug, similar to the first except that its device was a couple of bright red lobsters (and its lettering, not having suffered so much washing, was complete, and read, 'A Present from Southend') and poured out some more of the beer.

"Goes with fish, some'ow," said the host, taking a deep draught. "Say what you like about tea, it don't honestly go with fish. I'm partial to fish,

although I sell it, and you wouldn't believe the things we find in them."

"Jewellery?" Mrs. Bradley hazarded.

"Ah. Rings mostly. Once it was money they told us have come out of the old Armada. What do you make of that?"

Mrs. Bradley, who could scarcely credit it, replied vaguely but on a congratulatory note, and once again mentioned night-gowns.

"Ah, that!" said Mr. Dewey, with deep satisfaction. "Regular Casanovas, them police! So interested in that night-gown that they never even asked me to tell 'em my opinion where it came from."

"I thought they knew where it had come from."

"Thought they did. Thought they did. But I got my own reasons for thinking 'em wrong. Come outside, and I'll show you."

They finished their beer, and then Mr. Dewey led the way to the backyard. This was piled with empty fish-boxes and contained, besides, two dustbins, a heap of old iron, two derelict perambulators, and the charred remains of a bonfire. It was surrounded by a black wooden fence, patched, here and there, with odd pieces of untarred wood. On the west side, over the fence, was the drying ground of a small laundry. The combined smell of fish, from her host's premises, and petrol (used for cleaning) from his neighbour's, was trying, but Mrs. Bradley, fortunately, found it bearable.

"The night-gown came from next door, I suppose?" she said.

"Oh, it came from next door all right. No manner of doubt about that. Just blowed off the line, like anything else might do. But was the police content with that? Neether ought 'em to be, says you, and you'd be right. But, you see, the police, they went by the laundry mark, and the laundry backed 'em up in that, to save trouble, not wanting it broadcast."

Mrs. Bradley had to confess herself baffled by this lucidly-delivered but unsatisfactory and unfinished explanation. She looked at Mr. Dewey for enlightenment.

"Come inside again," said he, with a vast chuckle. He appeared to be a man with a keen but individual sense of humour. Mrs. Bradley followed him in, past the two young men who were still faithfully busy upon their mysterious explorations and dissections, to the parlour upon whose table still reposed the empty mugs.

"My old woman's gone to the pictures," volunteered Mr. Dewey, pushing the mugs to one side and settling his elbows comfortably upon the table. He ate and spat prawns, a handful of which he had picked up as he

passed through his shop. “The boys’ll have to glycerine these,” he remarked. “Just got to the ripe, they have, but I dunno about to-morrow. Are you partial to a nice dressed crab?”

“Has it got to the ripe?” Mrs. Bradley delicately enquired. As though this were the best joke he had heard for some time, Mr. Dewey chuckled delightedly for several minutes. Then he assured her that he was talking as between friends. Mrs. Bradley, who had not the faintest idea how she had come to achieve the status of friend in such a very short time, thereupon agreed readily to take the crab, paid over the shilling which Mr. Dewey thought was a fair price, and had the felicity of watching her host himself prepare the crab for the table.

After this she again returned to the (apparently) twin subjects of the police and the night-gown.

“Ah, yes,” said Mr. Dewey. “Well, you know how they run these here laundries?”

Mrs. Bradley tactfully said she did not suppose that she did know anything of the kind, and Mr. Dewey, pleased with this answer, proceeded to explain.

“Well, now, take yourself, as it might be, or my old woman, if you like. You make up the bundle to send to the laundry. The laundry puts its mark on each article. Gives you a number—thirty, say, or something—anything you like. Well, after that, everything marked thirty comes back to you, like, don’t it?

“Now, you, perhaps you’re careful. We’ll say that before the sheets, or whatever it might be, ever leaves your house, you’ve got your own mark on them, your name, might be, or a ’nitial in special embroidery. Therefore, when your stuff comes back, you knows pretty much where you are, because you’ve got, as it were, a double check—your mark and the laundry mark. Correct?”

“Quite correct; and very aptly expressed.”

“Thank you. Well, now, take another person—take my old woman, for instance. She don’t send much to the laundry—sheets, as I say, and handkerchiefs—us cleaning more than our noses on ’em, as you can guess. Then perhaps she’ll send pillow-cases, big table cloths, anything as wants a particular boil or is heavy to lift, or anything like the boys’ flannel trousies, as wants to be cleaned instead of washed—see what I mean, don’t you?”

“Perfectly. And none of it marked at home, and only identifiable because of the laundry mark.”

“Legally speaking, that’s right,” said Mr. Dewey vigorously. “Of course, my old woman swears she’d know our stuff in the dark from other people’s, and personally, I’d bet my bottom dollar as she would. But, so far as the laundry’s concerned, there isn’t any proof, except their mark. See what I mean? Unless we was to mark our stuff ourselves.”

Mrs. Bradley said that she saw, and that she supposed that the night-gown in question had a laundry mark.

“Of course it had a laundry mark,” said Mr. Dewey. “Of course it had.”

Mrs. Bradley waited patiently, but as no more information seemed to be forthcoming, she enquired:

“Had it, by any chance, Mrs. Platt’s laundry mark on it?”

As a result of this question, she thought that her host would have apoplexy. She had never before seen a man so completely overcome with laughter. He answered the question as soon as he could, however, and replied, while he wiped away tears.

“No, it didn’t have Mrs. Platt’s mark on it, or any other mark except the laundry number of a woman that lives up Dale End. But she took and declared it didn’t belong of her when the laundry sent it home, and back it came, and then they had to set to and look for hers, all the time declaring it must be a mistake, and she didn’t know her own night-gown when she saw it.”

This observation also appeared to delight him, for he repeated it, with winks and chuckles.

“Didn’t know her own night-gown when she saw it! What can you make of that!”

“You mean she didn’t see it very often?” asked Mrs. Bradley sedately. Mr. Dewey, gasping for breath, said that it was a good thing his old woman couldn’t hear him passing remarks on such a subject with a strange female, but there, what was life if you couldn’t have a bit of a laugh now and again?

Mrs. Bradley confessed that she did not know, and watched him anxiously whilst he went off into fresh paroxysms.

“Thing is,” said Mr. Dewey, when he recovered, “that night-gown didn’t come from Mrs. Platt, and it didn’t come from Dale End. Name of

Murdon, she is. Up at Dale End, I mean. It came"—he lowered his voice —"from Doctor Triblett's Home."

"A nursing home is that?"

"They call it a nursing home. It's for the Mentals, really."

"But how do you know that's where it came from?"

"Ah, thereby hangs a tale. I tried to get the police to listen to it, but, bless you, they didn't want no information from me. 'I tell you, John Bradbury,' I says to the sergeant—that being my name for him on account of a tale I could tell you later—'I tell you,' I says, 'that thereby on that night-gown hangs a tale.' It was the discovery of that poor creature in the tank that led me to tell him. But would he listen? You're telling me."

He sat back, apparently well satisfied with this narrative. Mrs. Bradley, deeply and genuinely interested, pressed for details.

"But, tell me, Mr. Dewey," she said, "the tale that hangs upon the night-gown, and how you know where it came from."

Mr. Dewey cleared his throat, smiled with great enjoyment, and began.

"Well, returning to our mutton, if you'll excuse the French, it was like this here. You recollect my observations re laundry marks? Well, it all followed on from that. You see, I said there wasn't no name on it, and the wrong laundry mark, but what I didn't say was that there was teeth-tears."

"Teeth-tears?"

"Ah. Tears things with their teeth, some of 'em do, like rabbits tearing greenstuff. I could show you if I had that night-gown here."

"But what about Mrs. Murdon at Dale End?"

"Her? Oh, I couldn't say, beyond she denied it was hers, and beyond I can back up what she says—although my old woman don't know that, and a good job too, says you."

"Now, one last question, Mr. Dewey. What is Mrs. Murdon's laundry mark?"

"Fifty, done in red, and so she told 'em, and so it was on the night-gown—as they showed her."

"Thank you very much. It is immensely good of you to have helped me. Where did I leave my crab? Ah, there it is. Oh, there's one more point. Does the nursing home ordinarily send its washing to this place next door to you?"

"Be funny if it did, wouldn't it?" His intelligent little eyes twinkled at her. Mrs. Bradley chuckled.

“But, if you will forgive what is probably a stupid question,” she said, “if the nursing home does not send its washing next door, how do you know that the teeth-tears in the night-dress relate that night-dress incontrovertibly to the nursing home?”

“Because I delivers fish there, of course. Many the time I’ve seen her, poor dumb creature, a-biting and a-tearing at her clothes—nearly always a night-gown it is, because they dursen’t let her out of their sight, and if so be she do happen to give ’em the slip, why then, you see, the police soon take her up again. Happened once or twice that has. Good-looking, too, in a way; or was, before she got bloated, poor soul. Some of us has had more than our fair share of mercies, sometimes I think.”

Mrs. Bradley sincerely and solemnly agreed, and there was a short silence before she asked the next question.

“Tell me,” she said, “was the woman found in the cistern the woman we are referring to—the dumb, tearing creature in the night-gown?”

“No, not her, poor soul. Everybody in this town knows her, I reckon, and the dead woman nobody don’t know. The corpse, oh, no, that wasn’t her. Besides, I’ve seen her since. Always deliver there myself, I do, not liking to send the boys, them being impressionable and young. I’m there on Wednesdays and Fridays, regular order, that is, and sometimes kippers, say, or a box of smoked sprats, or something extra. Partial to fish they are, there, but whether it’s the doctor or his patients as eats it, I couldn’t rightly say.”

“What is the name of the doctor in charge? I wonder whether I know him?”

“In your line is it, doctoring? Well, this one took it over from old Doctor Triblett a matter of two year ago. Name of Lecky; Doctor Aloysius Lecky. Very clever they say he is, and very kind to the patients, though there’s rows with the relations if any of ’em happens to give him the slip. Carelessness, they call it. Criminal negligence, once he got had up for, but nothing was proved against him. A good-’earted fellow he is.”

“Lecky?” said Mrs. Bradley thoughtfully. “I think I must just look him up. I thought I knew all the alienists in this country.”

“There is one thing you ’aven’t asked me, you know,” said Mr. Dewey, going with her to the door.

“And that?”

“Which way the wind was blowing when that there night-gown must have come over my wall.”

“I know which way it was blowing,” said Mrs. Bradley.

“I’ll back you couldn’t say for sure.”

“I think I can. Your garden runs north and south.”

“Correct, although not many females would know it.”

“Therefore, to come over that wall”—she pointed—“the wind would have to be west or near enough. But it wasn’t. It was north-east for three days running just then.”

“Well, I’ll be damned!” said Mr. Dewey.

• CHAPTER 10 •

George II jug, London, 1740. Made by Edward Feline.
Antique dealer's advertisement.

• 1 •

The lane wound uphill for more than half a mile. It seemed to leave the town abruptly, at a house called Ollans, and then to climb into the country past a reedy lake, a long brick wall, and a couple of roughly marked football pitches.

The house which broke the wildness was fronted by a deep wide ditch which had all the obvious advantages of a castle moat. On the far side of the ditch was a wall, and on top of the wall, which merely shored up the ditch and dropped down into it, was a smooth lawn dignified by two cedar trees.

Mrs. Bradley would have walked past, not realising that this was her destination. Fortunately, however, her attention was attracted by a tall and, at first sight, exceedingly beautiful red-haired woman wearing nothing but a long white night-dress. The coarse bright hair leapt from her crown like flames. Her thick white arms were bare. Her feet were shod in Wellington boots, and, as though to demonstrate this, she stretched out one leg to attract Mrs. Bradley's attention. She also laughed. Her mouth was orange-red, and her small teeth, gleaming like the fangs of a she-wolf and as pointed as the incisors of a vixen, glistened with saliva, a drop of which was running down her chin. She then waved at Mrs. Bradley, who waved back, and smiled at her.

By the time Mrs. Bradley reached the gate the woman was gone. An unweeded gravel drive, fretted by wheel-ruts and tyre marks, led to a very fine Georgian doorway and porch, and also to a Pickwickian gentleman in riding costume who stood in the entrance watching her as she approached.

“Ah, Doctor,” said Mrs. Bradley, stretching out a yellow claw and cackling harshly at him, as he shrank away from the greeting. “Who would have expected you here? And you have changed your name, I notice. By deed poll, I hope, and not merely as a temporary convenience? And how many patients have you? And why do their night-gowns blow into other people’s back yards? Or are they, perhaps, flung there?”

The stout man retreated as precipitately as though her questions were bullets, and she concluded the last and least pertinent to a closed and bolted door. She heard the bolts grate home, and cackled again as she turned away and walked back along the gravel drive to the gate.

The red-haired woman was on the lawn again as she passed by along the road. Mrs. Bradley jumped down into the ditch and, finding some sort of cat-hold on the brick-work climbed the wall.

The woman stood like a nervous but inquisitive animal, fascinated, but prepared for instant flight. Mrs. Bradley felt in the capacious pocket of her skirt and brought out a packet of chocolate. The woman retreated a step or two, then chuckled on a low note, stood still, and watched craftily whilst Mrs. Bradley undid the paper wrapping and displayed the contents.

In less than five minutes they were happily eating and talking, and Mrs. Bradley had a complete mental image of the night-gown—its material, make, fastenings and laundry mark. The madwoman made no objection to Mrs. Bradley’s antics, but faithfully followed every movement and then imitated the whole series, monkey-like, on Mrs. Bradley’s own costume.

Then both of them laughed, and Mrs. Bradley, gently taking her leave, dropped into the muddy ditch again, scrambled up the bank, and was off.

She looked back and waved when she got to the bend in the road. The madwoman made no obvious response, but was watching her. Then she began twisting her hands one over the other.

“I must have you out of there, my woman,” said Mrs. Bradley, halting and watching these motions. “What do you think you’re doing that for, I wonder?” She herself imitated the movement as she made her way back to the town.

“What qualifications has Doctor Lecky?” she demanded of her sister-in-law that evening.

“I have no idea, but I don’t think a private asylum is an asset to the neighbourhood,” Lady Selina replied. “I do hope, Adela, that you are on the way to getting Sally out of this foolish scrape.”

“You can hardly call getting mixed up with murder a foolish scrape, Mother,” her daughter protested. “What do you know about Doctor Lecky, Aunt Adela?”

“First that he is not a doctor, unless some obscure American university has bestowed the degree on him since I last met him; second, that his name is not Lecky,” Mrs. Bradley replied. “It is interesting. The last time I saw him was when he was being tried for murdering his wife.”

“But he was let off?”

“Apparently.”

“But he did it?”

“To the best of my belief. You remember the Ball case, Selina?”

“And we’ve had three murders here,” said Sally.

“Yes, child.”

“And he’s mixed up in them, in some way that you haven’t told us.”

“Sally,” said Mrs. Bradley, before Lady Selina could speak, “do you remember you once wanted to write a detective story?”

“Oh, and I bothered all sorts of people to give me tips, and I read books about poisons, and tried to get in at the Old Bailey. Yes, it was rather fun, but the story gave up on me at Chapter Four, so that wasn’t very much good.”

“Could you pretend that you wanted to write another?”

“As a matter of fact, I’ve begun one.”

“How many people know that?”

“Oh, about a hundred, I should imagine. I told everybody, because I thought it might keep me up to scratch. I thought I was bound to get it finished if simply everyone was pining to read it, and kept on asking me about it, but I think I’m fed up with it now. The real thing is much more exciting.

“Ferdinand,” she added, at table, “thinks he’s going to keep me away from the trial. Let him attempt it, that’s all.” She shot a defensive, half-defiant glance at her mother.

“Ferdinand is a very able boy,” Mrs. Bradley observed with a grin.

“Yes, but I want to go,” said her niece, annoyed. “I’ve never attended a trial, and how am I ever going to be able to do a trial in a detective story if I’ve never been to one?”

Neither of her elders replied. The next morning, before dawn, Mrs. Bradley was up, and was walking to the bus-stop, which was about three-

quarters of a mile from the house.

The first bus came up empty, and dawn was breaking as it reached the outskirts of the town. Mrs. Bradley got off at the Town Hall and walked to the point from which she had first set eyes on the red-haired woman in Doctor Lecky's garden. This time the garden was empty. The sun was rising, and the lawn was ragged with the rain which had fallen during the night. Mrs. Bradley again walked up the drive. All the windows of the house were heavily shuttered, but, while she watched, a servant came round the side of the house, and unbolted the shutters of the front rooms. Seeing Mrs. Bradley she paused, hesitated, and then came up to her.

"Did you have an appointment, madam?" she asked nervously. Mrs. Bradley grinned and asked:

"What have you done with my stepdaughter?"

"Your stepdaughter, madam?"

"Yes, yes. A woman with red hair. A paranoiac."

"A woman with red hair? Oh, madam…"

She put a hand to her mouth, as women will who are going to scream. "Oh, madam! She's run away! Out all night the doctor was, and two of the men, and both the bloodhounds, and everyone."

"And didn't they find her?"

"Not so far as I know. But the doctor he hasn't come back yet."

"I shall call in my solicitors," said Mrs. Bradley grandly. "Neglect, that's what it is. You may tell your employer…No, I won't come in. I won't wait to see him. I won't see anyone. It's a disgraceful and monstrous thing, and the poor woman must be traced."

She walked rapidly to the gate, and hurried away down the hill. On her way to the bus stop she called at the police-station. The sergeant was more than willing this time, to hear what she had to say. The inspector, excellent young man, although it was still very early, was already in his office and at work.

"I want you to help me find one of Doctor Lecky's patients," she announced when she saw him. "I am responsible for inciting her to escape."

"What for?"

"To find out how simple it is for the inmates to leave that house without being immediately detected."

"Well, Sally," she added at breakfast, "I've seen your nice inspector again."

“I know. He rang me up.”

“When, child?”

“”Twenty minutes ago. He said you wanted him to chase an escaped lunatic.”

“I insisted, child.”

“But, Auntie, he hasn’t got time! He told me so over the ’phone. He wants clues, not lunatics.”

“But the lunatic is a clue, child.”

“In that case,” said Sally, getting up from the table, “I’ll go and help him chase her. What is she like?”

“Tall, red-haired, beautiful (except that she is coarsened because of her disability) and dressed in a white night-gown.”

“Sally,” said Lady Selina decisively, “you have promised to go shopping for me in the town this morning. I can’t spare Parkes, and I can’t go myself because it’s my First Aid morning.”

“Oh, yes, Mother, but after all…”

“But, Sally, I don’t want you to go chasing my lunatic,” said Mrs. Bradley firmly. “You would only terrify the poor creature if you caught her.”

“So will Ronald. He’s an awful ass.”

“Yes, child. But I shall be with him, and so no permanent harm will result from what he does.”

“You’re really going sleuthing with Ronald? I do call that unfair! If you vamp him, I’ll never forgive you.”

Mrs. Bradley grinned. She was interested to note a distinct improvement in her niece’s spirits. Lady Selina, bidding her daughter not to be vulgar, produced a neat shopping list.

“Here are the things I want,” she said, as she handed it over.

“I suppose I can have enough petrol for my own car?” Sally enquired. “I can’t drag things home in the bus, and you know that most of the shops have given up sending. It says so in the windows.”

“They will send for me,” said Lady Selina, getting up to go to her First Aid class at which, now, she was an instructor.

“But, Mother, that’s horribly unpatriotic. After all, there’s not much sense in saving your own petrol if you’re going to waste other people’s.”

“The tradesmen,” said Lady Selina, “do not come under the heading of ‘other people.’ I trust, Adela,” she added, “that your lunatic, when found,

will be returned to her proper sphere. I don't want her brought in to lunch."

• 2 •

The red-haired woman had not travelled very far. About an hour after Doctor Lecky and his helpers had come back to a late breakfast, the quarry rose up from behind a massive burial vault on which she had spent the night, muttered and giggled a bit, and then began to gather flowers from the graves. As she plucked she sang, tunelessly but, to Mrs. Bradley's trained intelligence, comprehensibly, all the verses of a folk song entitled "The Saucy Sailor."

"Ah, here you are, my dear," said Mrs. Bradley. The cemetery was to the west of the town, a big open space decorated by a grey stone building vaguely ecclesiastical in conception, through the middle of which was a gateway and a road for funeral carriages. The shop of a monumental mason flanked the railings on the east side of the cemetery, and a florist's jostled a second-hand furniture shop on the west, where the open ground with its headstones was bounded by a wall.

Mrs. Bradley had not immediately fixed upon the cemetery as the madwoman's sanctuary, but that was merely because she did not know that it existed. Having, however, tried two churchyards without success, she enquired of the inspector whether there were any more churches in the neighbourhood, and it was then that he had mentioned the cemetery.

The inspector, being young and enthusiastic, was very much impressed by her 'second sight' as he called it, but Mrs. Bradley had based her search for the woman on evidence gained from the previous day's conversation. The same conversation had convinced her that the woman's case was one which would yield, in time, to patient and sympathetic treatment. The deaths of her husband, child, and mother in (Mrs. Bradley thought) a railway disaster had resulted in what seemed total mental derangement.

"Of course, she wants something to live for, if I do cure her," she said, "otherwise she'll lapse into melancholia. She's better as she is than that."

"Yours is a responsible job," said the young inspector, sombrely. "What are you going to do with her now you've found her?"

"She'll have to go back to Doctor Lecky for a time. Although she is getting no treatment there, she is not ill-used or unhappy. She ran away not, I think, with any idea of escaping from the nursing home but in imitation of what she saw me do when I left the house. And, of course, paranoiacs do wander. They go in search of the old, happy, safe days, when they were children, perhaps, or when they were snug in the womb. In other words they want their mothers." The red-haired woman was ambling aimlessly towards the grey stone building. "We will go for a ride in the car. You are so hungry," she added compassionately.

Tears came to the madwoman's eyes at the mention that she was hungry. Like most mentally deranged persons she had a perpetual lust for food, finding mental compensation of some sort in attempting to satisfy a carnal appetite. Suddenly her expression changed. She dropped the flowers she had gathered, picked up three with thin stems, and, looking craftily at Mrs. Bradley as though she were doing something secret and sinful, she began to plait them together.

"You like your work?" asked the young inspector, when they had left the house.

"Oh, yes, I like it," Mrs. Bradley replied. "Plaiting. That was the movement she was making the other day, then. How could her night-gown have clothed the body of the woman you found in the A.R.P. tank?" she suddenly demanded.

"But…no one has ever suggested that her night-gown was on that corpse!"

"Mr. Dewey, the fishmonger, was willing to place his special knowledge at the disposal of the police," said Mrs. Bradley gravely; but the young inspector, who had understood from Sally that her aunt was a wag, merely chuckled in what he hoped was a sufficiently appreciative manner. He was in awe of the small, brisk woman with her bright and basilisk eye.

"You remember the night-gown in the case of Constance Kent?" she enquired, with apparent seriousness.

"But it isn't a night-gown we're looking for. We've got the night-gown. We merely want it identified."

Mrs. Bradley cackled.

"I thought you had interviewed Mrs. Murdon of Dale End?"

"Yes, but that all peters out. Whether it was Mrs. Murdon's night-gown or not—and, mind you, I don't blame her for refusing to identify it—

there’s nothing whatever to connect her with the murders. In fact, she’s got the best of all possible alibis. She was having a baby at the time.”

• CHAPTER 11 •

Goldfish.
Title of a painting by Paul Klee.

• 1 •

"The thing is," said Sally, "that all this night-gown stuff, although awfully interesting, is nothing to do with my murder."

"Inspector Stallard thinks that all three deaths are connected," Mrs. Bradley reminded her. Extraordinary how cheerful Sally had become, she reflected, since that morning in the newspaper office.

"Oh, Ronald! We've argued dozen of times. How could they be connected? The first one—a Town Councillor; the second one—an unknown woman, probably a…"

"Sally!" said Lady Selina.

"The third one," continued her daughter, who, like a saucy barrister, had made her point, whatever the judge had to say about it afterwards, "an absolutely harmless telephone operator doing a spot of A.R.P. How can there be a connection? I thought Ronald had got hold of a brain-wave at first, but, the more you think about it, the more you realise…"

"How right he may be," said Mrs. Bradley.

"Then there must be a Ripper about," retorted her niece.

"Sally!" said Lady Selina.

"All right, Mother. But what else can you think?"

"Things that are true and lovely and of good report," said Ferdinand, coming in from the garden. "What is the argument, anyway? Oh, Mother, there you are! Look here, what do you make of that decision against Rubrick in…"

He carried his mother off, talking urgently but quietly in the beautiful voice which was the only thing he had inherited from her except his brains.

“There!” said Sally, gazing after them. “He would come and interrupt, just as I was beginning to get at something!” She went to the telephone and rang up Pat at the office of the local paper.

“On an assignment,” said a voice from the other end.

“Where?”

“Preparing to report on the reopening of the Public Baths, which were to have been used…”

The voice tailed off into inaudibility.

“Speak up,” said Sally encouragingly. But she obtained no response, so she gave up the telephone, put on a coat, and, behaving extremely cautiously until she had stalked and located her mother, stepped on to the grass border of the lawn and so made her way to the garage.

“Is there any petrol, Sims?” she asked.

“I could manage a couple of gallons for the small two-seater, Miss.”

“Shove it in and look slippy. Mother’s about.”

She let in the clutch carefully, and by the time the sound of the car had brought a scandalised Lady Selina to the window, she was driving out of the park gates on to the road to the town.

• 2 •

“Oh, that?” said Pat, when Sally had lied and wormed her way into the building, “Well, the fact is that these Baths were to have been used as a mortuary. Shrouds and coffins have been delivered in hundreds since the beginning of the war. But now they think they’ll use the Methodist Sunday School Hall, so that people can go swimming again if they want to. So the two Swimming Clubs have staged a sort of Grand Opening Night, and I’ve been told off to report it, so I thought I’d better come along this morning and find out the lie of the land and get a copy of the programme.”

The Baths presented a familiar sight of greenish-blue, gently undulating water, clean tiles, high diving boards, and spring boards covered with matting, and gave the rather sinister impression, so Sally thought, that along the edges of the tiled pool, a snake (really a line of coloured bricks to mark the water level) was writhing its way around the bath. Its tail in its mouth, like Jormungand, it achieved an unbroken line of dark blue and black which wavered and swayed with the gently lapping water.

“Only just filled it,” said Pat, leaning over the edge. “I should soon fall in if I watched the water swaying about like that. Isn’t it lovely, though. Now where’s Tom Talby? He promised that he’d be here to shoot me the stuff. I’ve got to annotate my programme—when I get one!”

A chunky, almost nude young man with a deep chest, skin improbably hairless and smooth, and short, thick, bright-pink legs, came out of one of the dressing boxes and waved.

He began by approaching them from the shallow end, and the opposite side of the bath, but, seeming to change his mind, he suddenly made a swift half-turn to the right, elevated his body in a surprising arc, straightened his legs, and dropped, with almost excessive neatness, head first into the water. His head came up; he shook it, plunged it in again and swam across to them. Then he hitched himself out of the water by means of the handrail, on which he swung like a gymnast, and emerged, dripping water in streams from his elbows. He used both hands to push back his chlorinated hair. He blinked and wiped water from his nose.

“How that beastly stuff hurts your eyes,” he said.

“Oh, Tom,” said Pat, “don’t drip on us. Sally, this is Tom Talby. Tom, meet Sally Lestrange.”

“Shan’t shake,” said Mr. Talby, lifting one knee and pushing water off his thigh with two muscular hands. “Take the will for the deed. Well, Pat, what dope do you want? And you see that you spell old Wankelow’s name right, this time. He was pretty fed up after our last gala, I might tell you.”

They plunged into the business of the programme of which, it appeared, there was not yet a printed copy.

“Bakeley was to have seen about the printing now Charles has joined up,” said Mr. Talby. “But, of course, the fool forgot to have old Mother Commy-Platt’s name put among the donors of prizes, and as she’s good for five quid, it wouldn’t do to offend her, curse her. Thank goodness she doesn’t want to judge this year. Said she got very nervous leaning over the edge of the bath to take the names of the winners, and that there was a draught from the door at the shallow end. Old cuckoo. Still, Bakeley ought to have remembered. However, the printer has promised them faithfully for one o’clock to-day. I went to see him myself.”

“You ought to give us your printing,” Pat observed. “Our rates are quite reasonable, and we never make mistakes once you’ve passed the proofs.”

Sally sat back on the white-painted bench at the side of the bath and watched three small boys in the shallow end, one on a red rubber tyre, the others without adventitious aid, struggling splashingly with an overarm stroke. Their display of energy and the fact that there were three of them, caused Mr. Talby to break off in his description of the programme and his forecast of possible starters and probable winners, to report, with a kind of gloomy amusement, upon an entry he had received from a sporting gentleman named Burt, who lived, it appeared, in the more squalid part of town.

"What do you think that lout proposed at the last programme meeting we had?" he demanded suddenly.

The reporter, scribbling busily, said that she did not know.

"Well, you know those three little London kids who are billeted in Queen Lane, and found that dead woman in that A.R.P. tank near the school? Suggested we should run a special gala item with them in it! Said it would 'draw the people.' Silly idiot!"

"Why?" asked Pat. "Wouldn't it draw the people?"

"Yes, but look at public opinion, besides the effect on the kids."

"I shouldn't think it would affect them. Of course, Mrs. Platt wouldn't like it."

He ignored the jibing tone and went on:

"In any case, we don't want to draw the people all that much. The police won't allow us to have more than a hundred and fifty spectators and fifty swimmers, anyway, because of A.R.P. It took me the best part of a week to get the Baths Committee to say that we could have the gala at all. A nice fool I should look, getting told off by the Council for having an item like that!"

"Any more items?" asked Pat.

"Yes, the usual general stuff, but nothing you need get ready. Then there's the Senior Diving and the Water Polo match. We wanted to begin the diving with flights, rather like the Highgate Club display I saw at Wembley last year. Personally, I'd prepared a one and a half reverse, a two and a half with pike, and a forward cut through Isander, but no go. We've lost our best divers to the Army. So it's to be a competition on ordinary lines, and Burt will run me close, if he doesn't win."

"It's awfully funny, how people love to see diving," said Pat, looking up at the boards. "I say! That top board isn't right! It's not even straight."

"Oh, rot," said Tom. "You're cross-eyed. Still, perhaps I'd better go up."

He walked to the diving-boards, climbed to the top, stood poised for a moment, and then took off in a faultless swallow dive.

"Not many Baths have a board high enough to show off that dive," said Sally. "I love to see that spread of the arms, like wings, and then that lovely dip and curve and speed in approaching the water. I'd like to ask him exactly how it's done. I've never been able to time it properly myself."

"Carry on, then," said Pat, "I've got to speak to the Baths' superintendent a minute about our camera-man."

Sally, however, did not mention swallow-diving. She asked for Mr. Burt's address. Mr. Talby, slightly surprised, supplied it, and then, with a magnificent sea-lion flop, appeared to fall into the water, only to straighten his thick, pink legs at the very last moment to turn the apparently ungainly movement into a clean, precise dive.

"He seems a jolly good swimmer," Sally remarked as they made their way towards the door. She watched him plough his way on a powerful crawl stroke three times up and down the bath.

"Yes, Tom's good," agreed Pat. "He lives for swimming. He's only nineteen, although I think he looks older. I suppose they'll call him up, like everybody else. We shall want three Press seats at the gala," she added. "I'd better go back and tell him, in case he only keeps one. He ought to know, but I bet he'll go and forget."

"Oh, don't go now," said Sally, "I want you to come and help me match some wool. I'd ask Aunt Adela, but she's got the same sense of colour as a sheep."

"I shouldn't have thought a sheep had a sense of colour," Pat observed.

"You've said it," Sally cryptically replied. "Bless her magenta garters!" she added irreverently.

• 3 •

Meanwhile her aunt had taken a bus to the lower end of the town and had found the postman's office and the A.R.P. tank.

She had also located Lionel, Billy, and Bosso. The eight-year-old was in school, his half-day having been altered from afternoon to morning to fit in with the latest scheme for educating the children who had been received in Willington.

It was Bosso who saw her first and reported her presence to the leader. Lionel had so far recovered from his fright at having landed on the corpse at the bottom of the tank that his reaction had been to patrol the vicinity daily (both in school-time and out, it is regrettable to mention) in the hopes of catching the murderer. The doctor's piece of river-weed had disposed of the suicide theory, and the boys had heard the case talked over fully at their new homes.

"Hi!" said Bosso. "There's some old woman. She wants us."

"Perhaps she's the murderer," said Billy hopefully. "I reckon we ought to surround her."

"Can't do that. It's wrongful arrest," said Lionel. "Let's go and see what she wants. Bosso, you stop here on guard. Billy and me will go."

"I saw her first," said Bosso.

"All right. Billy, you stay."

Billy, however, abandoned his post as Mrs. Bradley came nearer, and strolled up to hear her remarks.

"Mr. Lionel Percy?" she enquired. Bosso guffawed. Lionel gave him a punch, and modestly answered:

"That's me."

"Ah," said Mrs. Bradley, regarding him benignly. "The boy who discovered the body."

"Yes, that's me," said Lionel again. "I jumped right in on it," he added. He pointed to the cistern. "In there, it was; at the bottom; and I jumped right in on it."

"Excellent," said Mrs. Bradley. "Was anybody with you at the time?"

"Yes. Them." He indicated with a thumb his lieutenants. "They dared me to swim in it, and I jumped right in. And then my foot got on her—on her face, I think—and then…"

"He didn't half holler," Billy observed, "and we helped him out, and shoved his shirt on him, and up comes a copper, but not the one as seen us before, and nabs hold of Lionel and then blew his whistle, and old Mother Dobkin at Number Thirteen she thought it was an air raid warning"—the other little boys hooted shrilly at the disclosure—"and she chucked all her

money out into the street, and put on her gas-mask and came running out the front door, and asked the policeman how many aeroplanes, and the policeman said, "You go back to bed," because everybody knows her, and she never gets up till about two or three o'clock…"

"Poor old soul," said Mrs. Bradley, cutting ruthlessly into the story. "Now what other policeman?"

"Well," said Lionel, unwilling to let Billy steal the limelight, "when we first started mucking about round this tank a Special watched us, and we bunked, and when we come back he wasn't there. But we've tracked him down now, and we know where he lives, and his name's Burt, and he come up to us and asked us if we'd like to get a prize for swimming, and we all recognised him, and Billy asked him if he was a Special, and he said he was a special Special, and we mustn't let on we'd found out he was one at all, and he give us frippence."

"Might have got him into trouble," said Billy, "because he didn't stop us, and as we know who he was, his sergeant might not like it, and he might get into trouble, so he told us keep our mouth shut, and we could play round the tank when we liked."

"And where does Mr. Burt live?" Mrs. Bradley enquired.

• 4 •

"I have been invited," said Lady Selina at lunch, "to give the prizes at the Swimming Gala. And while I am not at all sure that I am in agreement with the principle of awarding prizes in war-time, when other uses, one would suppose, might well be found for the money, still, I think healthy recreation should be encouraged."

"You ought to go, Aunt Adela, with Mother," said Sally. "You'd enjoy it. We saw a boy named Tom something dive from the top board this morning. It was jolly good. The board is a fearful height. Pat says it was built especially for an International they had there once, and hardly anybody ever goes off it. She said Tom only went off to show off, and she doesn't think he'll go off it in the Gala. She thought it wasn't safe, and Tom went off to prove that it was. He seems that kind of a boy."

"Interesting," said Mrs. Bradley. "No, not any more potato, thank you, Selina."

“Oh, and what do you think?” continued Sally. “A boy called Burt, who lives in some low part of the town down by the tank where the body was found—I’ll give you the address, Aunt Adela, if it’s any good—wanted to have the three little boys who found it in a swimming item in the Gala.”

“Disgraceful!” said Lady Selina.

“That’s what Tom said. All the same, this boy Burt will be in the gala, and apparently he is a very good diver, too.”

“Oh, is he?” said Mrs. Bradley. “How well your people do spinach, Selina,” she added.

“Yes. Tom thinks that Burt will run him close in the diving. They haven’t got the programme printed yet, otherwise I could have found out Burt’s other name. I’d rather like to know who he is, because Tom dives simply beautifully. What time is the gala, Mother?”

“I have promised to be there at two,” said Lady Selina.

• CHAPTER 12 •

St. Catherine disputing with the heathen philosophers.
A window in Clavering Church, Essex.

Mr. Burt had learned to swim in the canal, and he was standing contemplating this element when Mrs. Bradley visited him next morning at a quarter-past nine.

"Eddie?" his mother had said. "He's watching the water, down by the canal."

"Mr. Burt," said Mrs. Bradley, coming directly to the object of her researches, "what made you propose at the Programme Meeting of the Swimming Club that those three little boys should perform?"

"Oh, that," said Mr. Burt. He was a long, thin youth—deceptively thin, thought Mrs. Bradley, looking at his shiny-seamed suit which seemed to sprout wrists and ankles at the corners. "Oh, that? Well, what I say is—why not? Can't see their objection, myself. But then, what I always say is, give me a few old cats to put a spike in anybody's guns."

Mrs. Bradley, very cautiously, agreed. Then she said: "Where do they live, by the way?"

Mr. Burt shook his head. "It's no good. You can't sign 'em up for anything. If Mrs. Blinking Platt in this town says nah-pooh, nah-pooh it is."

"You are swimming, though, I take it?"

"Me? Oh, yes."

"Diving?"

"Yes."

"Water-polo?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a game is water-polo?"

"Well," said Mr. Burt, with some show of animation, "you can foul at it more and better than anything else, except, perhaps…"

He cast about in his mind for a suitable conclusion, but Mrs. Bradley, much as she would have liked to know the comparison he proposed to make, forestalled him by observing:

"I was wondering whether anybody had been drowned in this canal recently."

This apparently pointless remark obviously gave Mr. Burt an acute shock. He took the cigarette from the corner of his mouth, spat a shred of tobacco towards the muddy-looking water, and observed, with a preliminary glance over his shoulder:

"Talking of that, what about that there corpse them kids fell in on?"

"Yes?" said Mrs. Bradley; and added candidly, "I was wondering about that, too. But where was she drowned?"

"I could show you the place, if I liked," was Mr. Burt's illuminating reply. For answer Mrs. Bradley took him firmly by the elbow and allowed him, after his first startled exclamation and attempt to withdraw his arm, to lead her southwards along the towing-path.

The canal was bordered on either side by flat fields darkened at intervals by small copses. When they had covered about a hundred yards, however, a stream branching off to the left, and flowing under a small bridge, over which the two of them passed, began to wind its way past sedge and small creeping brambles in a manner very different from the broadly-flowing, lock-controlled level of the canal.

"And what have we here?" Mrs. Bradley enquired, halting, and gazing with benign interest upon the scene.

"Bit of the river out of which they cut the canal," Mr. Burt succinctly and lucidly explained. They walked on, along a path ten inches wide, until they came to one of the small copses which bordered the water. The path dipped down a twelve-foot slope at an angle of about thirty degrees. It was wet and blackly muddy at the bottom, and the dip was the receptacle for old tins, an ancient hat, and a small collection of the cast-off garments of tramps.

"A doss-place," Mrs. Bradley's involuntary conductor observed. The two of them climbed the opposite slope and almost immediately plunged downwards again, into another dip. This brought them on to the river-level once more, but here the path was considerably wider, and was shaded—or would be in spring and summer—by two or three tall young trees. The path sloped gently up again, and then down, and brought them to the water-level

once more, where a clump of thick bushes screened a dangerous, short, sharp bend. Here the soil, at some time, had fallen away, making a little precipice, a trap for anybody plunging onwards through the bushes.

Mr. Burt disclosed the danger by parting the bushes in front of Mrs. Bradley.

"You have to watch out," he said. "It's none too safe, I can tell you."

Mrs. Bradley surveyed the spot.

"What, apart from its natural dangers…?" she enquired.

"Stands to reason," said Mr. Burt morosely, "this is where she fell in, I reckon, and there's where I fetched of her out." Side by side, they regarded the abysmal scene.

Mrs. Bradley stepped a yard nearer to the edge. She had hoped, when she had heard of Mr. Burt, that, swimmer as he was, and actually resident in the neighbourhood of the crime, he might be able to help her; but her fondest hopes had not envisaged him as the saver of the body from the canal. She began to wonder why he had chosen that particular day for watching the little boys at play near the A.R.P. tank.

On the opposite bank of the river was an island, artificially created by the junction, at both its ends, of the canal with the river. Mrs. Bradley turned and walked briskly back to safety, descended to water level, and led the way towards a little bridge which she could see about sixty yards on. Mr. Burt, spitting with boredom, turned to follow her.

"How deep is the water?" she enquired, almost throwing him off his balance by swinging round on him to ask the question.

"Five feet in the middle and under that there bank we stopped at, six," Mr. Burt replied. He understood Mrs. Bradley to say "Ah!" Then both walked on again.

Mrs. Bradley did not linger long upon the bridge. A small path on the further side of it led on to the wooded island, and at the head of this path, where it branched off from the towing-path of the canal, she halted and said:

"Mr. Burt, Mr. Burt, do you see anybody coming?"

"Yes. A barge horse belonging of Tanners, and his *Betsy Jane*," Mr. Burt answered, with a mistrustful glance at her out of his sloe-black eyes. Mrs. Bradley observed the gangster look.

"Is Betsy Jane his wife, and is she on board?" she enquired.

“Barge. Wife of the same name. Couldn’t say if she’s on board, but they generally are, trust them,” Mr. Burt replied.

“Well, do you mind remaining here, greeting Mr. and Mrs. Tanner, family and collaterals, and shouting ‘Whoopee!’ or some innocuous remark, as soon as they get to the lock that I see in the distance?” proposed Mrs. Bradley.

“Say, what do you think I am?” Mr. Burt complained, preparing, nevertheless, to do as he was asked.

“A good citizen, and, I hope, a winning member of the Swimming Club,” said Mrs. Bradley cheerfully, disappearing rapidly down the path. Once out of his sight she moved with even greater celerity. It was surprising with what speed she galloped along and crashed through the bushes to hasten to a point opposite that at which they had paused above the little precipice on the other bank of the stream.

Here she worked over the ground, but, beyond the fact that somebody, before the heavy rains, had been sick in the vicinity, she made no discoveries.

She did hear, however, faint but masterfully clear, Mr. Burt’s cry as the barge reached the lock. She rejoined him with the same haste as she had left him. She found him seated dejectedly upon the railing of the little bridge, moving his jaws automatically on a piece of chewing-gum. He did not get up when he saw her but, moving the chewing-gum slightly to the side of his mouth, pronounced with considerable gloom:

“Could have collared a ride off him as far as the High Street. Got to get a towel for to-night. Baths laundry isn’t working since the war.”

“Ah, yes, the High Street,” said Mrs. Bradley carelessly. “How far would that be from where those little boys live?”

“No good you to harp on them kids,” Mr. Burt austerely reiterated.

“Mr. Burt,” said Mrs. Bradley, “how long would it take you to swim across the river?”

“How long?”

“Yes.”

“Whereabouts?”

“From here.” She took him by the arm, and so conveyed the suggestion that he should rise to his feet. He followed her, but very unwillingly, down the little path, and through the jungle of trees and bushes.

“From here,” said Mrs. Bradley, “across to our point of danger on the opposite bank.”

Mr. Burt surveyed the stream distastefully.

“I wouldn’t like to bet on it,” he said.

“I suppose,” said Mrs. Bradley, “that you never swim in the river in the winter except with the laudable object of saving life.”

“Me? Why should I?”

“For the purpose of earning a pound,” said Mrs. Bradley. She dived into the capacious pocket of her skirt and produced a formidable housekeeping purse, which bulged, however, in a heartening and optimistic manner.

Mr. Burt was quick, but the owner of the purse much quicker. From the moment that his sinewy hand closed, as he thought, on the booty, to the moment when he found himself falling down the riverbank, he lost count of time, and was in the dirty water, well in, before he realised what had happened.

Mrs. Bradley, still firmly on the bank, her black eyes snapping with amusement, waved a pound note in the air and cried out urgently:

“Now, Mr. Burt, right across!”

Mr. Burt had Cockney, not country, ancestry. With some humour he waved his hand, then laid his flat face on the water and threshed his way over. He could not haul himself out. “So it wasn’t just there?” thought Mrs. Bradley. She called out, loudly and clearly:

“Where did you pull her out?”

Mr. Burt, clinging on to a tree-root, pointed upstream.

“Swim to the place, and get out.”

She watched him paddle upstream. There seemed little current. In any case, he was a powerful swimmer. She hoped he would not take cold, for she was the very last person on earth to grudge him his attempt upon her purse. She held, with Shakespeare, that its contents were so much trash; she differed, however, from the Swan by appreciating, in the modern fashion, that her good name also would ultimately matter very little.

Mr. Burt, looking longer and thinner than ever in his wet suit, pulled himself out. He did not attempt to rejoin her, but sullenly remained where he was, and began to squeeze the water out of his threadbare suit and from his thick black hair.

“My dear Mr. Burt,” said Mrs. Bradley, when she had caught up with him, “you must come home immediately and change your clothes, and then I want to ask you some more questions about that unfortunate woman.”

“Change my clothes!” said Mr. Burt. “Who do you think I am? Lord Nuffield?”

“But you’ve got another suit, dear child,” said Mrs. Bradley persuasively. “What about the one you wear when you take out your fiancee?”

“My girl?”

“Your girl!”

“Huh!” said Mr. Burt, with such depths of feeling that Mrs. Bradley was both sympathetic and deeply impressed.

“Well come along, anyway,” she said gently, “and as we go you shall tell me all about her.”

To his own immense surprise, as they walked rapidly up the slope and down the other side of it, and up again, and alongside the river-loop to the canal, and so along the towing path to Mr. Burt’s rather dingy little house, he found himself doing exactly as she suggested.

“But,” said she, when he had finished, “why on earth didn’t you assert yourself immediately the film was over? That was the moment. Any goop could see that.”

“I know,” said Mr. Burt bitterly. “Funny thing about me. You won’t believe me, after what I tried to pull on you—” he looked sheepishly at her and then on the path again—“but I lack my nerve.”

“I am sure you do,” said Mrs. Bradley agreeably. “What is your fancy for this afternoon’s gala?”

“Me, I’m going to get the two hundred yards breast-stroke.”

“Breast-stroke?” said Mrs. Bradley.

“Breast-stroke. And no butterfly style, neither.”

“But, my dear Mr. Burt, I had no idea, no idea whatever, that you were a breast-stroke swimmer.”

“Aren’t I, though?” said Mr. Burt, regaining about thirty-five per cent of his original self-possession, and perking up like a newly-watered flower. “If I don’t take three-fifths of a second off of the existing Club record, don’t blame me.”

“Really?” said Mrs. Bradley. “Now tell me, Mr. Burt. how much longer, or shorter, would that swim of yours have taken, supposing that you

had employed the breast-stroke, at your best speed, instead of that very attractive and workmanlike crawl?"

"You ought to write for the papers," said Mr. Burt.

"Granted. And so I do. But…?"

"Wouldn't a-made all that difference. See what I mean? Time I took a racing dive, say, I'd be across that bit, pretty well, seeing I know where to come up with me head, not to shove it in the mud the other side, and, of course, it not being the black-out, but only just about sunset."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Bradley. They had left the canal bank by this time, and were walking up his home street, which sloped at an angle of one in forty-four from the towing path at the bottom. "But, tell me, Mr. Burt, suppose that you were pushing a—let us say—a dead body—across the stream—"

"Here!" said Mr. Burt loudly. "Who are you talking to! I may have took a snatch at your purse. Don't say I didn't, and sorry I did, being the first time, as I dare say you rubbered, you being fly to time it, like."

"You bungled it badly, if that is anything to go by," said Mrs. Bradley placidly. "And if the loan of five pounds, as between friends, and covered by the usual informalities of a gentleman's agreement, would be of the slightest assistance to you…?"

Mr. Burt waved it aside.

"You can't do that," he said. "I don't take money from ladies."

Mrs. Bradley was so much enthralled by this remark that she almost asked him to repeat it, but, for the sake of the matter in hand, decided not to do so. Instead she said:

"Well, you must please yourself. The offer remains open if you care to reconsider it at any time. Now, reverting to this question of a body…"

"Here, half a mo! I want to know what you're getting at."

"Murder, Mr. Burt."

"Her in the tank?"

"Presumably."

"But…"

"No, no. Answer the question."

"I'll be damned if I do."

"Very well. You must expect me to draw my own conclusions."

"But I don't want to be mixed up in anything."

“No, I’m sure you don’t. You could have identified the dead woman, I take it?”

“I might have, if I’d remembered what she looked like after I shoved her up the bank, but, then, I don’t remember. Besides, she wasn’t dressed the same. It was in her clothes, I see her.”

“Yes, I admit that. Mr. Burt, assuming, for the sake of argument, that the woman you rescued and the body the little boys found in the tank were one and the same person, how could anybody have removed the body from where you laid it, without your being aware of the fact?”

“How? Easy! Because as soon as I see she was dead, I done a bunk for home, that’s why.”

He seemed pleased with this reply. Mrs. Bradley said no more until they reached his home. His mother was still leaning on the gate in the attitude in which Mrs. Bradley had left her. She regarded her dejected-looking son and his wet clothes with neither curiosity nor the slightest flicker of interest, but replied sedately to Mrs. Bradley’s greeting and then she and Burt went indoors. Mrs. Bradley, left alone, except for a cat and two small boys who were dragging an iron-wheeled truck untiringly up and down in front of the same three houses, made off towards the top of the street. Trolley-buses ran along the top, and she hoped to ride in one as far as the centre of town.

She had not reached the end of the row of houses, however, when the sound of running footsteps made her turn round. The runner was evidently unaccustomed to the exercise, and Mrs. Bradley, recognising Mr. Burt’s mother, went part of the way back to meet her.

“Says he’s sorry he spoke saucy, and always glad to oblige you. Nothing to do with him, the cistern, but had gone to get the doctor, not to bunk ’ome, and there she was, gone, when Ted got back. Never intended no harm, and is a good boy, only son I got, a widow seventeen years, was wearing a costoom, brown ’e fancies, but couldn’t swear to it, and a berry ’at when found. Never set eyes on her in all his born, and don’t know whether the one in the tank was her or not.”

She gave out this rich spate of information in a series of loud grunts, and with other symptoms of a severely taxed respiratory system, and then turned and walked towards her house.

Mrs. Bradley hastened after her, and asked, when she caught her up:

“Is your son a special constable?”

"Ted? No, but he got a tin hat from his firm before he got the sack. Fire-fighting, that's what he volunteered for, and he got the tin hat for that."

Mrs. Bradley thanked her, and took her leave again. It was fairly certain, she thought, that the girl Burt had pulled out of the river and the body found in the cistern were one and the same but the connection could be proved later on. Mr. Burt's determination to avoid identifying the body must be accounted for, Mrs. Bradley supposed, by the fact that he had rifled the handbag, or otherwise robbed the body, when he found that the rescued woman was dead. It was certain, she thought, that he had not gone to fetch a doctor. That had been an obvious afterthought.

She thought that she might profitably follow up the history of the handbag. There was the scarcely less interesting subject of the clothing to investigate. Full of thought, Mrs. Bradley reached the top of the road, and travelled in great state on the front left-hand seat of a silent-moving trolley-bus to the offices of the *Record*.

"I want a ticket for the reopening of the Public Baths," she said.

"Apply at the Baths, or to the Hon. Sec., S. B. Brownlow, Esq., 22, The Woodland, Bordars Road. It's flats," said her acquaintance behind the ground-floor counter. He regarded her with a certain amount of favour.

"Ring up the Baths for me, please."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. Ask them how their prize fund has gone this year. I'd rather like to contribute if it isn't too late."

"Needn't ask about the prize fund. It's early closing day, so you better buck up across the road if you want to buy a silver cup or anything. What do you want to give?"

"A silver cup would be very nice, I think."

"How much do you want to spend? A couple of quid, say? Do you a good-size one for that, if you mention the name of the paper and say I sent you."

Mrs. Bradley believed this to be a pleasantry, but was duly undeceived when, five minutes later, she put it to the test.

"The *Record*? Oh, yes, thank you very much, madam. We have a good cup here…" It was Mrs. Bradley's first encounter with Councillor Zacharias.

The cup she chose was marked down ten per cent by the magic, it appeared, of the *Record*'s name and connections. Ten years previously,

before he had had his accident, its editor had been the champion, five times running, of the local swimming club, and had played international water-polo. All this was related by Councillor Zacharias as he tied up the parcel and made out the bill.

"And even now," he said, wrapping up a brooch which Mrs. Bradley proposed to give to her niece Sally Lestrange, "he could give most of the present Club team five seconds in the hundred, and beat them. He was a wonderful swimmer. We shan't get another one like him."

"And did he learn to swim in the canal?" Mrs. Bradley demanded.

"Ah, so he did. Do you know the Lily Loop where the canal goes straight on and the river loops round by Bewer's Field. It's a pretty spot. Often I have walked Momma there on a pleasant Sunday afternoons."

"Is that near the island?" Mrs. Bradley enquired.

"Ah, near enough. There was lots of swimming there, especially on Sunday afternoons until the Council wouldn't have it. So now it must be before eight o'clock in the morning, like bathing from the beach at some of the seaside places. Mrs. Commy-Platt decided that. She said the boys were bathing without their costumes, and that was disgusting."

"Dear, dear!" said Mrs. Bradley, much impressed.

• CHAPTER 13 •

The Tower of the Blue Horses.
Title of a painting by Franz Marc.

The gathering at the formal reopening of the Public Baths was remarkable chiefly for the great diversity of people present. Downstairs, on the bath level, sat all those who had not paid for their seats (except, in some cases, expensively and indirectly, by offerings to the Prize Fund) but had had to be invited. With them, but further from the prize table and the arm-chairs reserved for members of the Baths Committee, were the parents and more affluent or consequential friends of the competitors. The Press was represented by Pat (for a conversational and appreciative description of the proceedings), a snubby youth of seventeen (for a report of the programme and a list of the winners), and a spectacled young man with a Press camera (for smirking photographs of competitors, and more formal portraits of town notables, the Baths Committee, the Prize Table, and Lady Selina, who had, of course, consented to preside at it).

Leaning (offensive of breath from hasty lunching on fried fish and chips) over the edge of the dressing boxes and on the stout gallery rail, were the lesser lights of the town. These, as one of them pointed out in the course of a debate with a steward, had, at least, paid for admission, and what enthusiasm was shown was chiefly displayed by them, largely in a partisan spirit which added considerably, Mrs. Bradley thought, to the interest of the proceedings, which might otherwise, to the uninitiated like herself, have seemed a little dull.

These were opened by a large piece of orange peel which alighted in the middle of the deep end and was retrieved spectacularly by a young man in bathing slips who was vociferously cheered by the gallery but admonished by an extremely nervous Baths superintendent, who said that, really, he didn't ought to, not where there was ladies. A second piece of

orange peel, which fell in the middle of Mrs. Bradley's cerise and magenta hat, was disregarded by the audience (which was cat-calling the first muster of competitors), and therefore had no news value.

The first item on the programme was a sixty yards Club handicap, and, to Mrs. Bradley's illogical but very great surprise, one of the competitors who started from scratch was the young police inspector. She looked for Sally, but her niece was not among those present.

The race was over two lengths of the bath, and was close enough to be interesting. The inspector won by a touch from the other scratch man, hauled himself out of the water by the handrail instead of climbing up the steps, and went straight to Lady Selina for his prize. He saw Mrs. Bradley and grinned at her. She beckoned him, and, under cover of admiring his prize, a case of spoons, said to him:

"Child, take care of yourself. How many of you are together out there in the dressing-rooms?"

"We've got the Slipper Baths. I've got one to myself. Most of the men are in threes."

"Who is with Mr. Burt?"

"Our Ted? Oh, Broom and Cowie."

"Go and make a fourth with them, child."

"But…Lord, I'd better go! I'm in the event after this."

Mrs. Bradley gripped his navy-blue costume where he had rolled it down to the waist.

"Promise me, child," she said. The unfortunate young man, who did not dare to attempt to escape for fear of tearing his costume, groaned hollowly and Mrs. Bradley, recognising the sound for agreement, let him go.

The young inspector darted through the opening between the prize table and the chairs on the rostrum, and disappeared from her sight. Content, she consulted her programme to discover that the next item was an exhibition of various swimming styles by the Baths superintendent.

He demonstrated with vigour and with surprising grace—for he was a middle-aged, thick-set, apparently muscle-bound, grizzled sort of man—two rhythms of crawl stroke, the back crawl, the breast-stroke, the butterfly breast-stroke, sculling, swimming without using his arms and then without using his legs, surface diving—the soles of his small, brown feet coming neatly together out of the water each time in a manner which, for some

reason, seemed to the audience funny—canoe-swimming, plunging, and, finally, using his plump wife as partner, the four methods of life-saving.

Mrs. Bradley watched the audience. The reporters were only vaguely occupied. The photographer was fiddling with his camera, but whether in boredom, or because it needed attention, Mrs. Bradley did not know.

Pat, who seemed interested in the display, scribbled intermittently during the demonstration, and was also making marginal sketches. She was half a dozen places away from where Mrs. Bradley was seated. The little programme reporter, his mouth slightly open, was watching the movements of the swimmer and making spasmodic notes on his scribbling pad and on his programme.

The audience, as a whole, was interested in the demonstration, and applauded each completed item with more than the ordinary amount of polite hand-clapping. The superintendent was popular, Mrs. Bradley deduced and a good deal of the applause was personal encouragement and appreciation.

He walked away modestly enough at the conclusion of the display, and Mrs. Bradley was interested to see on her programme that the next item was the Club high-diving championship, that Mr. Burt's name came first upon the list, and that Tom Talby's name had been deleted hastily but quite tidily in ink.

Burt was a neat and skilful diver. It gave pleasure to see his long thin body falling, like a star or an angel, from the high board into the lapping, green, translucent water, and with no more splash, it seemed, than a plummet or a diving seal.

His diving gave no clue, except to the initiated, to the muscular control and the beautiful, compensated balance which were necessarily brought into play by the management of such length and thinness. The other divers were short and chunky men whose thick legs naturally followed the line of shoulder to the water, and whose feet seemed as much a part of the curved-back body as the tail of a gliding fish. Theirs was all the natural advantage, but against it Mr. Burt could set the beauty of his height and natural stance, and his take-off (thought Mrs. Bradley, following the line of his hard and graceful body) was like Lucifer falling from heaven.

For his last dive (when it was certain that he had won the competition), he climbed to the highest board. Suddenly, as he stood poised and full of breath, Mrs. Bradley sensed that something was wrong. Pat

seemed to sense it, too, for she stopped writing, looked up at the diving boards, half rose from her chair, dropped her pencil, and then dived after it to prevent it from rolling into the bath. At the same instant that her fingers gripped it, Burt took off in a faultless two and a half forward somersault, amid great applause from the audience.

His long thin body, graceful as an eel, curved through the quiet water, and his black head rose to the surface. Easily and lazily he paddled to the steps and climbed out, unharmed and even triumphant: for the next moment the announcement was made of his victory.

"Top board again!" yelled someone.

"Go on, Eddie!" said somebody else, from the gallery.

"Come back!" cried Pat. She even got up and waved her programme. It was too late. Climbing like a large spider, Mr. Burt got to the top board again, and began to walk out to the end.

"Come back!" cried Pat again, but in the vociferous acclamation of the proposed spectacle, her voice was utterly lost. The next second Mr. Burt and the board came away, as it were, together. There were shrieks, oaths, and screams, but the diver, disregarding the risk, altered his downwards fall (to the amazement of all the watchers) to another spectacular two and a half forward somersault, finishing up with a sudden header which took him, miraculously, out of the way of the board, and landed him neatly and safely clear of all encumbrances. The board fell straighter, and cracked on the edge of the bath.

Burt paddled to the steps, climbed out, surveyed the floating board, and, artistically certain of his audience, dived cleanly under it, came up on the farther side, turned, and began to tow it to the steps. The audience shrieked, cat-called and cheered in violent appreciation of this impressive demonstration of *sang-froid*.

Suddenly Mrs. Bradley saw her niece Sally. She was standing in the doorway at the shallow end of the bath, and was wearing a white blouse which showed up strongly against the dark green wall behind her.

Mrs. Bradley picked up the piece of orange peel which she had shaken off her hat at the beginning of the gala, and flung it into the bath. Burt, who had climbed up the steps and was standing, legs apart, hands on knees and trunk bent forward, to get his breath again, shot upright, breathed deeply, and, once again, dived in. At the same instant there was an explosion from behind the partition wall formed by the dressing-boxes on Mrs. Bradley's

side of the bath, and out came the superintendent's assistant and commenced to say "Ladies and gentlemen…"

Cat-calls, whooping, whistles, and some genuine panic-stricken cries, immediately greeted this effort. At this inopportune moment of fright and commotion the air raid siren commenced its banshee wailing. Mrs. Bradley prudently moved to the side of her petrified sister-in-law, who was still ensconced behind the prize table, and at once a further pandemonium of overturned chairs and people climbing out of the dressing-boxes, or rushing and shoving on the gallery stairs, added to the terrifying din.

"Where's Sally?" yelled Lady Selina, clutching her sister-in-law in an authoritative, admonitory grip.

"Out of this by now," yelled Mrs. Bradley. "Thank goodness it's daylight!" she added, under her breath. "This at night would have been quite tiresome."

"Where's Sally?" yelled Lady Selina again. A deafening uproar from that part of the gallery immediately above her head completely drowned the major portion of Mrs. Bradley's reply, so Mrs. Bradley put beaked lips to Lady Selina's ear and replied with all her strength.

"Outside. She went outside."

The galleryites above them continued to stamp, shout, and scramble. Stewards yelled and pleaded. The Baths superintendent in his dressing-gown of purple Turkey towelling was on the second board of the diving stands—bravely, Mrs. Bradley thought, considering what had happened to the top board—and was directing operations as well as he could. The Town Councillors, shepherded by the assistants, were gathering out by the Slipper Baths' door of the building, and in their wake Mrs. Bradley followed, clutched by Lady Selina, who had been making some attempt to stand on the prize table and assert herself in her capacity of air raid warden.

"But really, Adela," she protested, as her indomitable little sister-in-law dragged her along like a terrier pulling a heifer, or a tug assisting a liner out of dock, "you will be very much safer inside."

"There's another murder in the wind," said Mrs. Bradley. The passage was rapidly emptying. She raised her voice at the first door they came to, and shouted:

"Ronald! Ronald! Are you there?"

"Come in," replied the young, strong voice of the inspector. "Come in here! I want to see you!"

She went in, Lady Selina still in tow. The room happened to be the Baths' laundry, and contained several mangles, some galvanised iron gas coppers, and a large ironing table. On this table was laid the half-naked body of a youth. The inspector, in his bath gown, and several Club members, their naked bodies girt about with towels or clothed in bath gowns with towels round their necks like scarves, were gathered round it.

"It's Eddie Burt," said the inspector. "Cut off, now, you chaps. Mrs. Bradley's a doctor. Get some clothes on, all of you, in case that noise means the goods." The air raid warning, depressingly insistent, was still being keened by the sirens.

Mrs. Bradley inspected the unfortunate Burt, and then observed:

"Poor child; I'm going to hurt him."

Apparently she did so, for, under her ministrations, the pallid, long, thin youth regained full consciousness, and jerked himself upright, with a flood, first of very bad language, and then of vomiting.

Lady Selina averted her gaze, and then removed her person, from the offensive sounds, sights, and smells thus thoughtlessly produced by the invalid, and went off to her post of duty, contriving, in some miraculous manner, to produce in transit her steel helmet and also a large handbell, its clapper muffled in a handkerchief.

"He'll be weak after this," said Mrs. Bradley. "Go and find his clothes. We must keep him warm."

The inspector went off at once, and Mrs. Bradley was left with the sick boy. She took off her coat and scarf, and wrapped them round him, and then despatched a lingering youth for some of the coffee which had been prepared for the Town Councillors, and which they should have drunk during the interval in the programme of events, whilst Lady Selina was addressing the competitors and the audience. A cleaner, who appeared in the doorway with the horror-stricken countenance of melodrama, she sent in search of the wherewithal to clean up the laundry ironing table and floor.

• CHAPTER 14 •

A Portrait of a Divine.
Title of a picture by C. van Oostsanen.

At the Baths, Mrs. Bradley had been introduced by her sister-in-law to two or three of the Councillors. They varied in type from the asthmatically earnest, in the person of Councillor Commy (a distant relative, Mrs. Bradley assumed—to his beaming delight—of Mrs. Commy-Platt, the owner of the town), to the pugnaciously Nonconformist, in the person of Councillor Grant, who contrived to sandwich the question, "Are you saved, sister?" between an enquiry in respect to her bodily health and another, over the top of her head, to the chairman of the Baths Committee, respecting the effect of alcohol on deep-sea divers.

He was a bald-headed, bull-voiced man with the characteristic Adam's apple of the extempore speaker, and the remains of the Scots tongue of his boyhood. He had once sung bass in the choir of Saint Saviour's, the big church in the Broadway (Councillor Commy confided hoarsely to Mrs. Bradley when his pugnacious contemporary and colleague had gone behind the scenes with the Baths superintendent, at the very beginning of the proceedings, "to have one on the house," concluded Councillor Commy, beaming, but not, apparently envious); but now, it appeared, Councillor Grant was the hot gospeller of a first-floor mission called the Sons of God Macedonian.

"And not teetotal they ain't," said Councillor Commy.

Mrs. Bradley, pertinently enquiring into the nature of a first-floor mission, learned that the adjective referred not to the mission as such, but merely to the fact that its meeting-place was a flat above a shop.

"In Eastdale Avenue, just off the station," Councillor Commy observed, to complete his explanation. "And convenient for the 'Rat and Cow-catcher,'" he added darkly.

After the sudden ending of the swimming gala, Mrs. Bradley, driving pensively homeward on the last of the petrol, reflected upon the conversation she had had with Councillor Commy and the monologue she had been privileged to hear from Councillor Grant, and thought that it might be interesting to further her acquaintanceship with the former, and attend a gospel meeting conducted by the latter.

Lady Selina was not at home when Mrs. Bradley arrived, but Sally was there, in the drawing-room, watching a maid who was drawing the black-out curtains.

"Early, aren't you, Mary?" Mrs. Bradley enquired.

"It's my evening out, madam," the girl replied, "and her ladyship doesn't like the curtains forgotten."

She finished drawing them, switched on the light, and closed the door quietly behind her.

"Mother's rabid about the black-out," Sally morosely observed, "ever since the village policeman knocked us up about a light which some lunatic had switched on in, of all places, the conservatory, where, of course, we're not blacked out at all."

"I sympathise with your mother," Mrs. Bradley observed, "but don't talk about curtains now. There isn't time. Sally, at what time did you get to the Baths?"

"At the beginning of the diving. Why?"

"Not earlier?"

"No."

"Where were you, then?"

"I went to find Pat. I'd forgotten she'd be at the Baths. I say, do you think our lunatic is still active?"

"Our lunatic?"

"Well, the murderer. Don't be tiresome, Aunt Adela."

"Very well, child. Why should Mr. Burt be selected? Have you any idea?"

"No, none at all. Have you?"

"You think it was an attempt at murder that we witnessed?"

"When the top board gave way? It looked rather like it. It must have been sawn right through."

"When could that have been done?"

"When? Oh, I see. You mean that whoever did it would have to get access to the Baths at a time when nobody else was there. Yes, you're right there. But I ought to tell you that when Pat and I were there yesterday, when she was annotating her programme ready for to-night, the top board must have looked peculiar, I think."

"How do you mean, child?"

"Well, Pat noticed it looked skew-whiff."

"It looked…?"

"Out of alignment, you know. She pointed it out. That's why Tom Talby went in off it. It seemed all right, but the Baths have been closed since the declaration of war and it needn't have been completed at one go, need it? Little drops of water, little grains of sand…all that kind of thing."

"I see your point, child, and I think it is a good one. But it narrows the field, doesn't it?"

"That's assuming that the same person made all the different attempts at harming people."

"Yes, it is assuming that. We must assume that, says Inspector Stallard."

"Oh, Ronald! Would you call Ronald brainy, Aunt Adela? Or not?"

"Well…not. But he's a nice young man," said her aunt reasonably, "and too many brains don't become a young policeman. They come between him and his duty, and, in the end, are a snare and a delusion to a conscientious man. He will go much further without them."

"Yes, I expect so. Have you met his fiancee?"

"His…?"

"Fiancee. A girl named Barbara Beaumont. An awfully nice girl. Pretty, too. She's in the A.T.S. It annoys him, for some reason. She's a driver. I should be if I could get Mother to increase my allowance, but she won't, and I couldn't possibly manage on A.T.S. pay unless she did."

"But the pay would be in addition to your allowance, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, yes, that's what I mean."

Mrs. Bradley missed the point, and said so. Her niece waved it aside.

"Go on with what you began to tell me," she suggested. "You said, and I agree, that they've only got to check up on the people who could manage to get into the Baths, to find the guilty person. But don't forget that their name is probably legion."

"How so, child?"

Sally began to check off on her fingers.

"The superintendent, his wife, his assistant, the cleaners; the people who used the Slipper Baths—it was only the Swimming Bath part which was closed, you see, because they had some idea at first of making it a mortuary; the women who used the Public Wash-houses; the women who worked in the Baths laundry, which functioned a bit just at first because of the towels used in the Slipper Baths; the Radiant Heat and Electrical Massage attendants—both those—what do you call them?—facilities—were still operating; the two ticket-office women—I happen to know they weren't sacked at the outbreak of war, because one of them is related to Councillor Slatt and the other to Councillor Emmey."

"Your knowledge seems to be extensive and various," said Mrs. Bradley approvingly.

"Well, there's not much sense in having been about so much with Pat if I don't manage to secure the low-down on all the local…"

"Nepotism?"

"Probably. Is there?"

"Not the slightest, child. Have you seen Pat since the accident at the Baths?"

"No. I hared for home when I heard the sirens. It's a false alarm, by the way. A little bird sat on the doings and caused a short circuit, or laid an egg, or something."

"And we haven't yet got to the point," said Mrs. Bradley, "and I am rather anxious to do so before your mother comes in."

"What is the point? You mean about the accident to Burt?"

"Yes, child. After you left by what we may call the front exit, your mother and I went past the laundry, and there was Mr. Burt laid out upon a table. He said he had been severely knocked about."

"Good gracious! Not another attempt to kill him?"

"He gave that impression, but remarked that he had nine lives, and, of course, one could say that in the rush for all the exits when the explosion occurred, followed by the air raid warning, anything might have happened to anybody. But why was Mr. Burt the unlucky person?"

"Does he know what happened to him?"

"No. He says that someone hit him on the head from behind, as people stampeded past, and that then he thinks he was trodden on in the rush.

Anyhow, now he's going to stay in bed for a bit. I want him kept out of the way."

"But it might have been an accident, Aunt Adela. Why should anyone make a set at Burt?"

"I don't know, and Burt says he doesn't know."

"Well, then, that's what we've got to find out, isn't it?"

"I am wondering whether I have found it out," said Mrs. Bradley. "But as for Burt, there is something more. He knows something about that drowning death, you see."

"What, the A.R.P. cistern woman? The lunatic? Does he know about that?"

"Burt dragged the body out of the canal—or, rather, out of the river where it makes a loop away from the canal and rejoins it on the south side of a little island."

"And Burt told you this?"

"More or less, child. More or less. At least, he agreed with me when I told him about it."

"And immediately afterwards there are two attempts on his life? I say, Aunt Adela! And what are you going to do now? Get Ronald to put him under police protection?"

"I have sent him to hospital. I am hoping for further developments."

"Well, the first one is due about now. Here comes Mother, I think."

She was right. Lady Selina, demanding her tea, came in with her steel helmet on her arm, and her gas mask, of the type supplied to air raid wardens, dangling in its bag from her shoulder. She shed her impedimenta, and Sally rang the bell.

"Well, Adela," said Lady Selina. "How is your messy patient?"

"Coming along nicely," Mrs. Bradley responded. "How is your messy little bird?"

"What little bird?"

"The one who caused the short circuit and set off the siren," Mrs. Bradley explained.

"I'll tell you what, Adela," said Lady Selina, as though the facetious beginning of the conversation had brought something of importance to her mind, "Stitcher's under the impression that somebody wantonly tampered with the high diving board at the Baths with the direct intention of injuring the youth who fell from it."

"With it," said Mrs. Bradley. "Indeed, Selina? That is interesting news. And who may Stitcher be?"

"The assistant superintendent, of course. I got Councillor Bordon, a member of the Baths Committee, to see Stitcher about it, and that was Stitcher's report. He says that it could not have been done earlier than this morning, and that it must have been directed against this particular young man—what is his name?"

"Burt, Mother."

"Yes, Burt—because no one else ever dives in competitions from that enormous height. My personal feeling is that Burt should not have been permitted to dive from it, either. I'm quite certain the water isn't deep enough."

"Of course it is, Mother," said Sally. "When the Danish international swimmers made their tour…"

"I am discussing the matter with your aunt, Sally."

"Sorry, Mother. Anyway, Tom Talby dives from it sometimes. Oh, thank the lord, here's tea!"

In spite of the black-out Mrs. Bradley went out again that evening. She caught the bus after dinner, and went to Councillor Grant's gospel meeting of the Sons of God Macedonian.

At the Broadway, where she got off the bus, she took some trouble to find out whether she was being followed.

The first-floor mission was in one of the poorer but still respectable parts of the town, a district of small lock-up shops, many of which were to let, long avenues of terrace houses, and advertisement boards for the two local cinemas and those in neighbouring towns which were connected with Willington by train or bus.

It was easy to find the place of which she was in search. Cracks of light showed all round its three large windows, and her torch showed her the number on the door, which was closed, but which bore the notice, faintly illuminated by a very small green lantern: 'Please Walk Straight Upstairs.'

Mrs. Bradley accepted the naïve invitation, and, the uncarpeted staircase re-echoing even to her light tread, achieved her objective by entering an open doorway and seating herself on the nearest plush-covered chair.

There were three rows of similar chairs, and almost all were unoccupied, for the meeting was not due to begin for another ten minutes or so. Behind them came seven rows of wooden, round-seated chairs of the kind used in drapers' shops. These were fairly fully occupied by people eating pieces of cake and drinking from large, thick cups containing a dark beverage which turned out to be strong tea.

A steward, a pimply-faced youth in his best suit, came up and offered her a choice of tea or coffee and a piece of cake. Mrs. Bradley declined to partake of any refreshment, but thanked the youth heartily for his proffered hospitality.

"It's the only way we get any collection here," was his artless remark. "Mr. Grant is always out of pocket over the refreshments, but it makes 'em all willing to put something in the plate, later on."

"And who is responsible for preparing the refreshments?" Mrs. Bradley enquired, somewhat surprised at Councillor Grant's generosity, since he did not look like a man who gave much away.

"My mother. She's the caretaker. We've got the shop down below."

"Very convenient," said Mrs. Bradley, absently.

A few more people drifted in, and were offered tea and cake. Most of them accepted both; some took only the tea. One little boy had his own and his mother's cake, and she drank both cups of tea, giving him a last sip to "wash the cake down."

Councillor Grant, Mrs. Bradley's immediate objective, was nowhere to be seen, and Mrs. Bradley could only suppose that it was his custom to make an entrance when the apostolic feasting was over. In this she was wrong, however, for whilst the congregation was still attending to the needs of the body, he entered with a long, thin, mournful-looking man in a morning coat and dark-grey flannel trousers, offered this man a seat, and supplied him with cake and tea.

At last the remnants were all cleared up. The last cup was taken (almost by force) from the hand of a septuagenarian who drank sibilantly from it the last dregs whilst the pimply boy was attempting to drag it from her hand. Then there was a considerable rustling among the congregation, followed by comparative calm.

Councillor Grant, who had stepped to the front of the small platform at the eastern end of the room, gave out the title of a hymn. There was no instrumental accompaniment, and the resultant dirge was both pathetic and

farcical. It was also, apparently, interminable. There were no hymn-books, but when about nine verses had been sung, the pimply boy appeared at Mrs. Bradley's side with a printed leaflet entitled: "Hymns and Spiritual Ditties of the Sons of God Macedonian."

Mrs. Bradley examined the printed matter with interest. Much of it was crudely socialistic in tone; the rest consisted of Hymns Ancient and Modern, those of Moody and Sankey, Salvation Army songs and, to her great surprise, two poems by George Herbert.

It was one of the socialistic ditties with which the congregation was engaged, and they themselves seemed glad, she thought, when at last it came to an end, and Brother Sim was requested by Councillor Grant to lead the meeting in prayer.

Brother Sim turned out to be the pimply boy. He spoke, with considerable eloquence but not much grammar, for nearly fifteen minutes, and, upon recovering himself (whilst the congregation, who, during the peroration, had bent forward in their seats, closed their eyes, and breathed stertorously, shuffled their feet and composed themselves afresh), he gazed about him in the slightly dazed manner of those who recover from self-induced hypnosis, and then walked out. He had gone to get the collection-plate from downstairs, but Mrs. Bradley could hear some words of what sounded like altercation from the ground floor.

The voices were soon lost, however, in the loud, firm tones of Councillor Grant, who was reading a portion of the Old Testament. The passage described the plague of locusts in Egypt, and Councillor Grant's rolling voice not only suited the Authorised Version but gave it a significance beyond even that which had been intended, Mrs. Bradley surmised, by the writer.

"'For they covered the face of the whole airrth,'" boomed Councillor Grant, "'so that the land was darrkened, and they did eat every hairrb of the land, and all the frrit of the trrees which the hail had left; and there remained not any grreen thing in the trees, or in the hairrbs of the field, through all the land of Egypt.'"

He closed the Bible, and addressed himself winningly to his audience.

"Before I add my jote and tittle to the glo-rries of God's worrd, let me introduce to you all heere assembled—prraise ye the Loord!—oor brither Bannerman frae the Kensal Rise deestrict, who has come heere aince mair

on pairil of his life through this awfu' darrkness of the blay-coot, to speak to ye this night.

"Noo, as I was saying, when I took leave to postpone my remarrks in favour of introducing Brither Bannerman, ye'll have noticed—or not, according to the level of your understanding"—here he withered two young women in the eighth row, who were checking the stitches on their knitting —"that the Good Book refairrs not only to the airrth, but to the whole airrth, and I would just draw your attention to the fact…"

Mrs. Bradley, rather to her sorrow, was never to have her attention drawn to this fact, whatever it might be, for there was a sudden spattering of quick, light footsteps on the stairs, and in burst the pimply youth. Pulling up short, he burst out:

"Mr. Grant, Mr. Grant, here's the warden! I think we're showing lights at all three winders!"

Councillor Grant, Mrs. Bradley noted with approval, was essentially a man of action. He swung round and clicked off the electric lights before the boy had finished his sentence.

"Bide you where you are!" he commanded his flock. The door opened. "I'll reason with the Son of Darkness!"

There was a muffled giggle at this apt choice of epithet, and, hearing it, Mrs. Bradley dropped on hands and knees and crawled noiselessly out at the door behind the convener of the meeting. The staircase was in black darkness, but she recollected that she had noticed another door on the landing. She stood up as Councillor Grant went stumblingly down the stairs, found a handle, twisted it, and went in. It was, she was relieved to discover when she switched on her torch, a kind of lumber room; an ante-chamber, apparently, to the large room used for the meetings. She seated herself on a pile of hymn-books, switched off her torch, and awaited developments.

These, however, did not materialise. All that occurred, when the rumbling sounds of Mr. Grant's below-stair remonstrances had ceased, was his grim tread again on the staircase. Then came a sound of light hammering from the meeting-room, and then sporadic applause, presumably for Brother Bannerman, for Mrs. Bradley could hear through the lath and plaster wall a colloquy in heavy whispers, consisting chiefly of the reiterated words:

"But I couldn't think to deprive you, Brother Grant."

And the rejoinder:

"Mon, dinna haver. We'll never get to wee Georgie's."

Brother Bannerman's whispered words were more audible than his spoken ones. Mrs. Bradley strained her acute ears to catch the substance of his remarks when he rose to address his audience, but it eluded her, and for about twenty-five minutes the low rumbling, punctuated by occasional trumpet-blasts—for Councillor Grant had a cold—continued unchanged.

The Sons of God Macedonian, Mrs. Bradley concluded must have very dull homes if this was their notion of inspiration and entertainment. Perhaps the tea and cake ensured the audience as well as the amount of the offertory, she reflected. Suddenly a scarping of feet and the legs of the chairs proclaimed that the speaker had concluded, and Councillor Grant gave out the number of a hymn, during which, he said, the collection would be taken.

The tuneless singing began. Mrs. Bradley took out her purse, and laid money on the pile of hymn-books beside her, trusting that whatever providence embraced the needs of the Sons of Macedonian, would see that it fell into those coffers most worthy to receive it. Having completed this touching act of faith, she crept to the door and opened it a crack, only to close it and withdraw herself the next instant, as the door of the meeting-hall opened. She did not wait to see who came out, but hid behind the door of the room she was in until the home-going member of the congregation was safely down the stairs.

She listened again, but this time there was no colloquy, acrimonious or otherwise, from the ground floor. She heard the street door shut.

When the offertory hymn was over there was another long prayer. Under cover of it, Mrs. Bradley slid unobtrusively into the room and occupied her former seat. Councillor Grant saw her come in, and so did the girls with the knitting. The one glared and the other two giggled. She did not know who else had noticed her entrance, but assumed that a number had done so, although the atmosphere was one of general, although possibly coerced, devotion, for Brother Bannerman was leading the meeting in prayer. This was followed by a marching hymn instead of a benediction.

Mrs. Bradley made for Councillor Grant.

"I want to see you," she said, "as soon as these people have gone."

"Then you'll need to come to Georgie's," pronounced Councillor Grant, as one who, while accepting the inevitable, does not propose to bow

to it. “And if your business is private, you’ll no need to pay heed to Brither Bannerman, for he’ll be with us, and we’re no a temperance organisation,” he added, with the same darkling humour as Councillor Commy had displayed.

“I’m glad of that,” said Mrs. Bradley simply. “How do you do, Brother Bannerman?”

Brother Bannerman shook her solemnly—lugubriously almost—by the hand, and the three of them followed the retiring congregation down the stairs. The pimply boy put out the lights immediately he had collected the leaflets from the floor and the seats of the chairs, and the meeting was indubitably over.

“Your organisation is political, then, I take it?” said Mrs. Bradley, as they stepped into the dark street from the even darker passage.

“Na, na, it’s no poleetical,” Councillor Grant replied, setting a good pace in the direction of the station. “How did you hit on us so easily?”

“I took time and thought,” Mrs. Bradley replied, sandwiching herself between the two evangelists, who, hands in pockets and both apparently accustomed to the dark street they were treading, slumped along with the crude tirelessness of elephants, one on either side of her. She added, two minutes later:

“I also asked one or two people where you held your meetings.”

Mrs. Bradley enjoyed the walk, although not another word was spoken until they were all seated at a table in the saloon bar of the “Rat and Cow-catcher” near the railway-station. It was a shabby, ill-favoured looking hostelry. Beer dripped drearily from the next table on to the floor. The barmaid, behind the uninspiring bar, polished glasses to the rhythm of a monotonous crooning, pausing whiles to wet her forefinger and remove some unusually pertinacious stain from the rim of a wineglass or tumbler. The proprietor lounged between the saloon bar and the private bar, which were separated from one another by a wooden partition on the customers’ side, and smoked a cigarette. An erstwhile but discreditable-looking customer of the public bar, making stealthy entrance, snooped cautiously about for cigarette-ends. Councillor Grant beckoned him furtively, gave him two cigarettes from his own case, whispered, “Dinna forget James Grant,” and dismissed him, finger to lip.

Mrs. Bradley, aware that the municipal elections were due to take place in November (and being vague as to the possible effect on them of the

war) regarded these dubious proceedings tolerantly, and, when Councillor Grant began to get to his feet to go to the bar and give his order, she forestalled him nimbly, observing that she had joined the party uninvited and was going to pay for the drinks.

"It's all right. I had no intention of paying for a drink for you," said Councillor Grant, with that directness, candour, and simplicity which (she supposed), together with the free meals at the Mission Hall, endeared him to the voters in his ward, "but if you've made up your mind, well, mine's a double whisky. Speak up, Brither Bannerman. What's yours?"

"I didn't really oughter, James, and that's a fact," said Brother Bannerman, coming to life with a jerk, and speaking with Cockney hoarseness. "But if it's all the same, I'll have a rum. Rum," he added to Mrs. Bradley, his dull eye lighting up, "is the drink in this 'ouse."

"Indeed? Then I think I'll have some," she responded, with great cordiality. The barmaid, who seemed accustomed to taking orders for a mixed party from the female element of it, sniffed (but of necessity, not discouragingly), breathed heavily upon the tumbler into which she proposed to pour Councillor Grant's double whisky, and then took down two tots for the rum.

"Leave it," said Brother Bannerman hoarsely. "I'll come over and help carry it, and I know how much soda for James. Save you carrying the siphon."

Mrs. Bradley had not thought of carrying the siphon, but she now perceived the necessity of someone's doing so, for the barmaid had lost all interest in the proceedings, except to say "Two and two" and to slap down the fourpence change like somebody flinging down the gauntlet.

Whether the rum was good or bad, Mrs. Bradley neither knew nor cared. Brother Bannerman sniffed at his cautiously, observed, with dark satisfaction, that it was the right stuff, and swallowed the lot at a gulp.

Mrs. Bradley attacked hers with a little more circumspection, but tactfully pronounced it very good. As she had not drunk neat rum before (so far as she could remember), she was hardly an authority, but she eagerly concurred with Brother Bannerman's suggestion that they should have another.

Upon this, Mrs. Bradley discovered that the rum was sixpence a glass, for Brother Bannerman made this clear by taking out a handful of small change and debating aloud with Councillor Grant whether he had better

change half a crown (which he was clearly loth to do) or give the exact money, in which case he would not have a shilling for the gas when he got home.

"And now," said Mrs. Bradley, "I want to know all about Councillor Smith: why he was murdered, who murdered him, and exactly how it was done."

"Oh, aye," said Councillor Grant, apparently not in the least surprised by the demand. "I'm not saying, mind you, that anybody can answer all that; forbye we've taken time from our muneecipal duties, you ken, to speir at Councillor Woods. But there's little satisfaction in that. Yon Woods tells what he thinks he will. Nae mair and nae less."

"Would it be of any use for me to have a wee crack with Councillor Woods?" asked Mrs. Bradley, confident that she was addressing Councillor Grant in his own tongue. Councillor Grant stared owlishly at her over his whisky, finished his drink with some suddenness, and bellowed for more.

The barmaid, apparently discouraged by the numbers or the condition of the glasses given into her charge by the proprietor, had abandoned them and was doing her hair. She finished the curl she was engaged on, and sagged to the side of the Councillor.

"Another double, do you want?" she enquired. "You'll have to have it quick. We close in a coupla minutes."

"Get it," said Councillor Grant. Mrs. Bradley, catching the eye of Brother Bannerman, which looked plaintive and expostulatory, hastily added a couple of rums to the order.

"One double your own splash two Old Jamaica, one and eight," gabbled the barmaid.

"It was two and twopence last time," said Mrs. Bradley, conspiratorially.

"The last drink ordered is always on the house here," said Councillor Grant, morosely. "Holds his licence on those terms, you see," added Brother Bannerman, gazing commiseratingly at his friend.

"You don't mean that the landlord here is the man I've to speir at about the murder?" Mrs. Bradley exclaimed.

"What else?" enquired Councillor Grant, looking coldly at the amount of whisky in the glass the barmaid had placed upon the counter. "I'll just be getting my drink."

He bore down magisterially upon his glass, and measured the quantity carefully with two thick fingers before he added the soda.

"Who was the person who left the meeting during the collection?" Mrs. Bradley suddenly enquired. Councillor Grant looked up, his piggish eyes suspicious, alarmed, and hostile.

"I dinna ken," he said briefly and untruthfully. "And it's useless to speir at Brother Bannerman," he added. "For he doesna ken one air raid warden frae anither."

"Oh, does he not?" said Mrs. Bradley. She beamed at Brother Bannerman who, awkwardly but with courteous intent, raised his glass and observed:

"Well, here's the sex."

Mrs. Bradley, its representative, bowed.

"Selina," she said when she got home, "who is the air raid warden for the Broadway district of Willington?"

Lady Selina, who was playing patience, glanced at the clock, then at her game, and then went across to her bureau. She took out a large exercise-book, opened it, and clicked her tongue.

"I might have remembered," she said. "Of course, it's that idiotic woman—Parks—Isabel Parks. No use at all, but she volunteered, and they took her. I protested (in private, of course. One can hardly call a woman an incompetent idiot to her face), but it was of no use."

"I suppose Mrs. Platt had some hand in the appointment of the wardens," Mrs. Bradley observed.

"She certainly had no hand in mine," said Lady Selina sharply.

"No, no. The Willington wardens."

"Oh, I expect so, yes. The way that woman is allowed to run the Council is a scandal. I've often said so. But what can one do? She has money, and those people worship it. If they ever get a Mayor she will probably finance him."

"I heard that she would be Mayor herself, if Willington became a borough."

"Charter Mayor? Yes, very likely. Just what she'd expect, impossible creature."

From this Mrs. Bradley gathered that at some point (never, incidentally, shown to Mrs. Bradley) the paths of Mrs. Platt and of Lady Selina had crossed, to the disadvantage, in some way, of the latter.

• CHAPTER 15 •

The Five Sages of China.
Title of a Finger-tip Painting by Kao Ch'i-P'ei.

• 1 •

"I suppose I've made an enemy," said Mrs. Bradley, relating the march of events to her son next day. "It appears that, by ordering rum for myself and for poor Brother Bannerman, I compelled Councillor Grant to pay for his last double whisky, whereas, had I held my unfortunate tongue, the creature would have had his drink without payment."

"Only half of it," said Ferdinand. "He couldn't have a double on the house. The terms of the licence used to be peculiar, and are the pride of the district. It appears that, long ago—how long, I don't know—a certain magistrate used always to be the very last man out of the 'Rat and Cow-catcher.' Well, the place got a bad name, and there was local representation to the bench that the licence should not be renewed; so the landlord—actually, I believe, an ancestor of the present Woods—suggested to his customer, that magistrate, that he could always get a free drink if he could persuade his brother justices to have the licence renewed.

"Well, it was renewed and, so that it couldn't come out that the landlord had bribed a magistrate, the form of the agreement was to be that the last drink served each day was to be a free one. Most people don't know that this has still remained the custom, although, of course, the licence doesn't depend upon it nowadays, and those who do know keep the knowledge dark."

"Ah," said his mother. "Interesting. You don't suppose…?" She did not finish her sentence. There was no need to do so. Ferdinand's mind was as quick as hers. He smiled, and his dark brows took an upwards slant of Mephistophelian character.

“I am sure that Smith would have known of the custom,” he said. “By the way, Sally has resigned from the A.R.P. telephone service, I see, and is going on the land instead. Much better; very much better.”

“I think Selina prefers it,” said Mrs. Bradley. “She does not like to think of her working all night.”

“Sally prefers it, too,” said Ferdinand, who appeared to be in his young cousin’s confidence. “She can’t get over that particular night, you know.”

“No. It was horrible for her.”

“Have you got anywhere with it, Mother, do you think?”

“No proof, child; not the slightest bit of proof.”

“How’s our friend Burt?”

“He wants to leave the hospital. He thinks I should let him come out.”

“You can’t do that. He’ll be set on again. Obviously he knows too much.”

“But he doesn’t, you know. He knows just enough to be thoroughly tantalising both to himself and to me. The poor boy spends hours of his time, the nurse says, in trying to work out how his having dragged that unfortunate woman out of the river can have given the guilty person the impression that he knows something about the body found in the cistern. I am sure that Burt does, as a matter of fact, know more than he has told me. For one thing, he knows he robbed the body, and hopes I don’t know that. Subconsciously, of course, he may know something to the murderer’s disadvantage, over and above what he knows consciously.”

“By the way, Mother, I suppose it has occurred to you that your own lively interest in these affairs, coupled with your reputation as a sleuth, is enough to place you in a position of some danger? I mean, if the rather unintelligent Burt has already been marked down by the killer, merely for conferring with you, what about yourself?”

Mrs. Bradley cackled.

“That is why I sat among the hymn books during Councillor Grant’s meeting of the Sons of God Macedonian,” she explained.

“You did what?”

“I thought the air raid warden was over-zealous,” his mother continued. “There was very little light showing from the windows. My view is that the murderer heard that I was going to the mission hall—I may say that, hoping for developments, I did allow this to be known—and decided

that it might be possible to put me out of action for a time. Realising that someone might think like this, I dived into the small room where they keep the hymn books, and waited until I heard somebody slip out. This happened whilst the offertory was being taken."

"Somebody dodging the collection, probably, and not the murderer at all."

"Oh, I don't know," said his mother thoughtfully. "The person I mean did not get away without putting something into the plate, I am quite sure. People who are quite well known in the town don't care to leave whilst the offertory is still being taken. I think we shall learn, when all is known, that the delinquent contributed to the (no doubt) good cause for which the money was collected, and then went out in the last verse of the offertory hymn, respectable to the end."

"Oh, I see," said her son. "So you know who the murderer is. I thought perhaps you did. Well, do look after yourself. There won't always by hymn books handy."

Mrs. Bradley cackled.

Her next appointment was with the landlord of the "Rat and Cow-catcher." Probably, in another age, the inn had been the "Rating Dowager," she imagined, and she was reminded of the elopements and post-chaises of more leisured and livelier times. Possibly the inn had changed horses for an infuriated mother or aunt in pursuit of the runaway couple, instead of the traditional angry father.

Out of business hours Councillor Woods proved to be a small, alert man with a foxy face which Mrs. Bradley did not, however, dislike, and a habit of clearing his throat after every statement as though he expected somebody to challenge it.

He was a widower; the barmaid was his daughter. Mrs. Bradley deduced that the throat-clearing was a nervous affectation dating from the days of his married life, and now unconsciously performed.

"The murdered Councillor?" he said, repeating Mrs. Bradley's words whilst he revolved in his mind the scheme of declaring roundly that he knew nothing whatever about either the man or the murder.

"Yes. I am told that he had his last drink in this house," said Mrs. Bradley unblushingly.

Councillor Woods looked at her with a combination of distress and distrust, and replied with the guarded manner of one who has known what it

means to be cross-examined in court.

"And if I admitted that, p'raps I'd put myself in the wrong about the murder. He didn't have his last drink in here. He couldn't have had his last drink in here. And why? Because I know, as well as you do, as his last drink done for him, and no drink that's going to do for anybody is served in this house."

"I'm certain of that," said Mrs. Bradley, conclusively. "But, tell me, Mr. Woods, wasn't he with friends here that night?"

"Oh, there was a party of 'em, so to speak," said Councillor Woods unwillingly. "Oh, yes, a party of 'em there was. I'm not denying it. Only, you see, they happened all to be ladies. Now what do you make of that?"

"Poison is notoriously a woman's weapon, Mr. Woods."

"Ah, but you see," said the landlord, sinking his voice impressively, "it couldn't of been anything to do with these ladies, because they'd got what they wanted at a little business meeting they had beforehand."

"Oh, it was to celebrate a business meeting, was it?" said Mrs. Bradley, who had already heard all that Stallard could tell her but who hoped to get more out of Woods.

"King of Lady Godiva," said Councillor Woods confidentially. "Same principle, if you cotton on to my meaning."

Mrs. Bradley, with lively interest, said that she did not, so, after giving her a sharp, appraising glance, he proceeded to make his point clear.

"Like this as it were: the Ladies' Knitting for the Services Committee at the Town Hall. Did you know we was applying to be a Borough? No? Oh, well, we are. There's been agitation for years. Ever since Peasbury—as used to be called Peaston—got their Mayor and Corporation, us here in Willington didn't see why we should take second place to them—see? And Mrs. Commy-Platt—you'll have heard tell of Mrs. Commy-Platt?"

"I've met her."

"Yes, well, she wanted to be, like, the Charter Mayor, see? And I think they'd give in to her, although I shouldn't hardly go as far as that myself. I hold as a woman's place is the home…"

"So does Herr Hitler," said Mrs. Bradley, nodding.

Councillor Woods gave her another sharp look, but could not pierce her blandness, and its deceptive appearance of innocence. He changed the subject.

"Councillor Smith, him being a man of some humour—very dry, he could be—says he'll willingly subscribe to the Knitting Fund if the Ladies' Committee will drink a glass of stout with him here at the 'Rat and Cow-catcher.' Course, he never thought they'd do it, and they had to bargain with him to excuse the teetotal members, which accounted for eleven out of the sixteen ladies on the Committee. Well, Councillor Smith, he excused 'em, on account the other five turned up at the time appointed, which they did, the last whip-up, I reckon, coming from Councillor Mrs. Perk, who's a Councillor in her own right, her husband never having stood. He see fit to beseech her not to go, but she being always one that believes in asserting herself, both inside the Council Chamber and out of it, although, mind you, a very nice lady if you stomach them, makes up her mind as she'll go, if only to keep her husband in his place, and she persuades the other ladies to come too."

"Including Mrs. Platt?"

"Including Mrs. Commy-Platt. It seems that they thought they might as well get a write-up in the local paper on account of it as not. Of course, I got a promise that when the write-up came out it should all be done very genteel, and refer to this house as an hotel, and the saloon bar as the lounge, and me as the genial host. Mind you, when they suggested writing up my girl Polly as the refined and deft-handed young dance hostess, well I drawed the line there. Of course, the house is nothing more than a pub—though glorified, I don't say, of its kind—but I've never held a licence for music or dancing, and that I can swear to, owing to having to pay two bouncers instead of one. People always get a bit more above themselves with music and dancing than just with simple drinking, if you'll notice."

Mrs. Bradley said she had noticed that the arts, finally, were exciting, and that alcohol was often soporific in its effects, and made a learned reference to the rites of Orpheus-worship, followed by a popular one to King David. Then she requested that Councillor Woods would give her the names of the rest of the party entertained by Councillor Smith.

"Mrs. Platt and Councillor Mrs. Perk," she said encouragingly, "and…?"

"Mrs. Councillor Clember, Mrs. Councillor Petty, and Mrs. Councillor Zacharias," said the landlord obligingly.

Mrs. Bradley wrote them down.

"And the drinks served?" she enquired.

"Stout, pale ale, port, stout, brown ale, and stout."

"Beginning with Councillor Smith himself?"

"Yes. He had stout, like he invited them to."

"Continuing with either Mrs. Councillor Clember or Mrs. Councillor Petty."

"The pale ale? Quite right. It was the second-named lady 'ad that."

"Then—let me see—the port would be Mrs. Platt. I can't imagine her drinking stout, and probably not even beer."

"You seemed to have formed quite an opinion of Mrs. Commy-Platt, ma'am, don't you?"

"That leaves Councillor Mrs. Perk, who certainly drank stout, Mrs. Councillor Petty, who had the brown ale, and Mrs. Councillor Zacharias, who, being a Jewess, naturally stuck to her bargain and had stout, whether she wanted it or not."

"Well!" said Councillor Woods, deflated by this pyrotechnic display. "Do you know the ladies, ma'am?"

"Only Mrs. Platt. I deduced that the strong-minded Councillor Mrs. Perk would keep to the letter of the agreement from a sense of noblesse oblige. I also infer that she is better educated than the other ladies."

"Because she's a Councillor? That wouldn't count in this town. We had a Chairman once couldn't hardly sign his own cheques, and a very able business man he was, and one of the very richest men in the countryside. A builders' contractor, he was, and a very nice feller, to boot. But how did you make her out?"

"You said that her husband begged her…Somehow one deduces social position from that, although I don't know why one should. It merely might reflect the character of the husband."

"Well, you beat the band!" said Councillor Woods admiringly. "We had a chap once, came to the fair—Phrenny the Wizard Pie—collargist they called him on the bills…"

Mrs. Bradley acknowledged the compliment with a hideous cackle of glee.

"You realise, don't you," she said, "and I am now speaking without reference to the fact that it would not have been a simple matter for the murderer, under all those eyes, to have put poison into a glass, that the bitter flavour of stout would have been of material assistance in disguising the taste of the drug?"

“Blimey!” said Councillor Woods, whose mother had been a London woman.

“Which leads us to the awkward and, let us hope, unnecessary conclusion that the poison may have been intended not for Councillor Smith at all, but for Councillor Mrs. Perk or Mrs. Councillor Zacharias,” said Mrs. Bradley, preparing to take her leave.

• 2 •

“Your point about the rest of the party is well taken, Mother,” said Ferdinand. “Anybody who had the same drink as Smith could have been the intended victim. And, in any case, the trouble will be to prove that the stout was his last drink, supposing that the poison got to the person it was meant for. How long did the party last? It couldn’t have been a very lengthy business, if, as you indicate, the women had only one drink each. At what time did they arrive? And when did they leave? And did Smith leave when they did, or did he stay on, and have other drinks, either by himself or with other people? He may have been poisoned after the party; not at it.”

“I thought I would call upon Mrs. Platt again, and perhaps on Councillor Mrs. Perk, and put to them those questions.”

“But, supposing for the sake or argument, that one of these ladies should be the guilty person? Mrs. Platt, according to your description of your first visit to her, is capable of anything.”

“Yes, there is that,” said Mrs. Bradley. Her son looked at her almost as suspiciously as Councillor Woods had done. “I think perhaps I will call upon all the ladies,” she added, after a pause.

• 3 •

Beyond a reiteration and a very slight elaboration of the facts as presented by Councillor Woods and the inspector, Mrs. Bradley obtained nothing, either from Mrs. Councillor Petty or Mrs. Councillor Clember; nor had she expected to fare any more richly than this. She decided to beard Mrs. Commy-Platt on the same afternoon, and at half-past three George (on borrowed petrol) drove her to Mrs. Platt’s house. It was his idea that Mrs. Bradley should add this amount of formality to the visit.

“I think we should cut more ice with that lady if you drove, madam, rather than took a public conveyance or walked.”

“I think we should check this bourgeois determination to cut ice, George,” his employer retorted. “It is undignified and unbecoming.”

At the Town Hall traffic lights they met Pat, and Mrs. Bradley explained George’s view and asked an opinion of it.

“What do you want from her this time?” Pat enquired, when she had agreed with George on the matter of the car.

“I suspect that I want to irritate her,” said Mrs. Bradley. “In any case, there is no reason to suppose that I shall not have that effect on her, so it is as well if I assume it to be my desire. I am probably lapsing into my second childhood,” she added. Pat giggled, and the car rolled on.

Mrs. Commy-Platt was resting after her lunch, which had been at two o’clock, since she would not be dining, she informed Mrs. Bradley, until nine.

“Dear me,” said Mrs. Bradley, “do you eat meat twice a day in wartime?”

“Four times a day, if you count the breakfast bacon,” Mrs. Platt replied. “Tell me,” she added, leaning forward, “do you think my life could be threatened?”

“It not only could be; it is,” Mrs. Bradley replied. Mrs. Platt, who was wearing long earrings and a rest-gown, leaned forward so that the earrings swung like pendula and the rest-gown disclosed a scrawny throat set about with pearls, and demanded anxiously:

“What makes you tell me that?”

“My passion for truth,” Mrs. Bradley answered. “This, however, would have been overruled by my natural kindness of heart but for the fact, simple, and, I am bound to add, significant, that you yourself asked me the question.”

“Yes, I did, didn’t I?” said the most influential inhabitant of the town. She seemed at a loss—an almost unique experience for her, Mrs. Bradley decided.

“Tell me, Mrs. Commy-Platt,” she said winningly, “what causes you to suppose that your life is threatened.”

“Well, twice I have been under the impression that my footsteps have been dogged.”

She paused, to allow this horrid thought to become the property of Mrs. Bradley's mind as well as of her own, and Mrs. Bradley began to nod, slowly and rhythmically. Then she said, after she had permitted Mrs. Platt her moment of drama:

"Once when you had drunk a glass of port at the inn called the 'Rat and Cow-catcher' in company with Councillor Smith?"

"Oh, no, not then. That was a long time ago. The unfortunate man has passed away…has…why, he's been murdered since then, Mrs. Lestrange Bradley."

"Yes. I wanted to ask you about that, Mrs. Commy-Platt. Can you tell me at what time that party began?"

"I am sorry I ever consented to take part in the ridiculous orgy," said Mrs. Platt, with annoyance.

"I thought it was a patriotic gesture on your part."

"Oh, well, yes, so it was…Go away, Isabella!" Mrs. Platt screeched suddenly, as her companion put a pale meek face round the edge of the door. "Can't you see I'm resting? I beg your pardon, Mrs. Bradley. You were saying…?"

"You were agreeing that your attendance at Councillor Smith's party was in the nature of a patriotic gesture."

"Ah, yes. But, you know, Mrs. Lestrange Bradley, I meant what I said the first time. I never would have gone! I never should have gone!"

"Councillor Smith was amusing himself, you think, at the expense of the Ladies' War Effort Committee?"

"Undoubtedly. Although, of course, he did give us a handsome subscription."

"Mrs. Commy-Platt: you are, if I may say so, a woman of the world. Is it your opinion that anything occurred at that party which could possibly have contributed (let us say) to Councillor Smith's tragic end?"

Mrs. Commy-Platt looked at Mrs. Bradley with almost an intelligent expression. That is to say, her self-satisfied mouth went thin and thoughtful, and her eyes narrowed warily.

"What makes you ask me that?" she enquired.

"At some time during that evening somebody administered poison to Councillor Smith. At what time did the party begin?"

"You asked me before. We were invited, I remember, for eight o'clock. I arrived at a quarter to nine."

"Really?"

"Yes. I could hardly be expected to go without my dinner."

Mrs. Bradley acquiesced in this entirely reasonable statement, and Mrs. Platt, who had appeared to think that the point was arguable, subsided, and then continued:

"By the time I had arrived the others were all assembled. Councillor Smith's behaviour was such as might have been expected of a man, as distinct from a gentleman, in the company of the opposite sex."

"That is to say…?"

"He made some unnecessarily gallant observations of—I am thankful to say—a general character, complimented those who took stout—to my mind a disgusting beverage suitable only for navvies—was pleased to inform me that I needed it, and left a ridiculously large tip for the waitress."

"The barmaid? At what time did he leave the tip?"

"At ten minutes past nine."

"How many drinks did he have?"

"I cannot say, except that, during the twenty-five minutes I spent in his company, he had only one glass of stout. It was ordered whilst I was there, and was put into the same glass as the one he had emptied before I arrived."

"You are sure of that, Mrs. Platt?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Lestrange Bradley. I watched the girl closely, having been accustomed all my life to maids and their lazy ways. Not a drop of water went anywhere near that glass, and when I pointed this out to the late Councillor Smith, all that he could reply, and that with a vulgar wink and a most inappropriate gesture, was that it 'hadn't better, neether.'"

Both ladies dwelt sadly for a moment upon this answer, and then Mrs. Bradley suggested that perhaps Councillor Smith had escorted Mrs. Platt to her home, as she lived farthest out of town and had no car.

"He?" said Mrs. Platt, answering the suggestion completely with this brief snorting sound. Mrs. Bradley drew out a small leather-covered notebook, poised a pencil above the virgin page, and looked expectantly at the author of the reply. "I called a taxi—or, rather, an inebriated but not altogether discourteous fellow whose exit from the public bar happened to coincide with mine from the lounge, called one for me. I rewarded the man, but not sufficiently (on principle) to tempt him to retrace his steps into the bar, and then I came straight home."

She rang a bell. Her companion appeared.

"At what hour did I get in after the special social meeting of the Knitting Committee with the late Councillor Smith?" she demanded of the scared-looking Isabella.

"I should have to look up the night book, my lady."

"Look it up, then. It's in the bureau over there. Although I don't know why on earth you can't remember."

"At ten-thirty, or thereabouts, my lady, I believe it was," squeaked the companion. "Or so I remember Nellie telling me. You'll remember, myself, I wasn't in."

The book apparently refused to confirm Nellie's memory, for Isabella glanced uncertainly at her mistress, and said faintly:

"It only says nine-thirty, yet Nellie remarked as how it was during the wireless service."

"As though one's maids listen to anything but the cinema organ and the variety shows!" said Mrs. Platt, with contempt. "Put the book away, Isabella."

• 4 •

"A good thing she had the book," said Pat, when encountering her once more on her way to the office of the *Record* to ask for the address of Councillor Mrs. Perk, Mrs. Bradley told her of the discrepancy of one hour between the companion's recollection of the time at which Mrs. Platt had arrived home, and the time as recorded in the night-book. "Otherwise you might have wondered what she was doing during that hour, mightn't you?"

"I can't think what the object of the night-book can be," Mrs. Bradley observed. "Is one kept in all respectable provincial households? It seems, in this case, as you say, to be kept so that Mrs. Platt can alibi herself against having propped up poor Councillor Smith in a doorway after she had put poison in his second glass of stout."

"Why not in his first?"

"Well, it appears—if Mrs. Platt is to be believed (and the night-book somehow has contrived to make this doubtful), that she did not get to the party until he had drunk at least one glass of stout."

"Oh, I see. Stout would cover the flavour of almost anything, I should imagine. I think it's loathsome stuff."

“The untutored reaction of an underdeveloped sense of taste,” said Mrs. Bradley equably. She obtained the address she wanted, for Pat knew it and wrote it down on a leaf of her notebook, waved, and drove off.

“Are we still cutting ice, George?” she enquired, as the car pulled up outside a large double-fronted house about three-quarters of a mile from the Town Hall.

“Not knowing this particular lady, I am unable to say, madam,” George replied, opening the garden gate for her. “Would this be our last call, madam? Our consumption was heavy on the hill we just ascended.”

“No. There is one more, George, but it’s downhill this time, so we can cut out the engine and just glide.”

George, who would sooner have died than allow it to be thought that he was ever guilty of so unorthodox a proceeding as cutting out his engine on a downward slope, said nothing. Mrs. Bradley cackled, and, walking between standard rose trees, reached a beautifully polished front door.

A neat maid, who spoke well, let her in and took her name. In a minute the mistress of the house came into the entrance hall and welcomed her.

“Not the Mrs. Bradley? I say, this is an honour. Do come in. Let Doris take your things. I suppose you’ve come about the murders?”

With this auspicious beginning they went into a cheerful, tasteful room with books and a small, bright fire, and talked, and had tea, still talking, and sent out to tell George to go home, and talked again.

“Good gracious!” said Mrs. Bradley at last. “I shall never get round to Mrs. Councillor Zacharias!”

“Oh, yes, you will. She’s a darling. You’ll like her. And he’s a dear little man. And now tell me what I’ve added to your store of information about these beastly affairs.”

“To be quite frank,” replied Mrs. Bradley, “you have not added anything. But neither have you deducted anything, I’ll add. I am glad, though, that you were there at the beginning of the proceedings.”

“You mean that my version of the party coincides with that of Mrs. Commy-Platt?”

“Well, that is not exactly what I meant. I meant that nothing you have told me has upset the facts which I have gathered, so far, about the deaths.”

“Haven’t I even given you a new angle? I should so love to give someone a new angle. It seems so easy in politics, but perhaps it is more

difficult in real life."

Mrs. Bradley took leave of Councillor Mrs. Perk with real regret, and promised to call again soon. George was at the wheel of the car by the time she left the house. He had had his tea, he said.

• 5 •

Mrs. Bradley had already met Councillor Zacharias. She had bought the silver cup from him, and was greeted kindly. He told her that he always served in the shop himself when he was not mending watches. His eldest son mended clocks, his second son kept the books, his daughter served in the shop; so did his third son; and his wife did all the buying. She was in the room behind the shop. Certainly Mrs. Bradley could go in.

"I utheda buya the part-tha of thpare bithycleth," Mrs. Zacharias confided to Mrs. Bradley, "thinth I am fourteen yearth olda. But I married into the vatchmakink, and now I buya for my old man becauth he'th thofta."

She was short, like her husband, but, unlike him (for the Councillor was very thin and reminded Mrs. Bradley of nothing so much as a peering little old mole) she was as broad as she was high and had five chins. Her eyes were creased in fat, but were as brilliant as Mrs. Bradley's own.

The old couple talked Yiddish when they were together, and Mrs. Zacharias had never been able to "getta th'Englitha," as she soon informed Mrs. Bradley, for she was voluble, friendly, humorous, and, Mrs. Bradley soon learned, bitingly shrewd and intelligent.

"Counthillor Thmitha?" she said, her eyes wary for once. "Yetha, I remember goinka to that party. I had th-touta becauth I thaida I would. He watha funny fellow, Thmitha. Dadda didden lika him, did you, Dadda? They utheda argue at the Counthil meetinkth, and one-th he called Dadda a dirty Jew."

She laughed, and showed fine small teeth. Her amusement was genuine. It must have been that Dadda had had, in the end, the best of the encounter, Mrs. Bradley surmised. The rest of the story proved that this had been the case.

"Yeth, and Dadda thaid, 'Tho watha Tholomon, Mithter Thmitha.' And Thmitha thaida, 'Vot you are talkink abouta?' And Dadda thaida, 'Vell, I toughta ve voth both talkink about the newa Public Batha, but if you vanta

talk about Jewtha I don' minda, becauth it'th nearly ten o'clocka, and the pubth'll be th-yut if you go on much longer, and that don' matter to a Jewa becauth he muth be dirty, like vot you thay, Thmitha, becauth he ain't got no utha for beathly thpongeth.'"

She laughed again, happily, at the recollection of Dadda's bon mot.

"So Councillor Smith was fond of his drink, was he?" said Mrs. Bradley. "Tell me about that party, Mrs. Zacharias. When did you get there?"

"Eighta clocka, lika vot Thmitha thaid. Dadda he didn' vant I th-yould go, but it voth only like buth'neth, and Thmitha paid up very gooda, lika vot he thaid he vould. He voth a man of hith vorda; I'll thay that."

"How many drinks did Smith have?"

"Three vile I voth there. Th-tout, th-tout, and th-tout."

"Now, look here, Mrs. Zacharias, it's highly likely that it was at that party that Councillor Smith took poison. What do you say about that?"

"Ah, I thoughta you voth come abouta the murderth. Funny vot folka vill do to get them-thelveth in the limelighta, ain't it? I vonth know a girl vot confethed to theven differenta murderth, and none of them th-yee committa thavink the lathta. Thith von the polith don' believa, and th-yee get-th avay to Thouth America and doink vell in the dopa."

"In the…?"

"You knowa…thnowa. Cocaina, heroina, opium, and thothe thinka…I donno much about them, but doink vell th-yee ith, the latht I hearda. Th-yye'th my Uncle Rueben'th thecond cothin by hith thirda vifa; that-th how I come to know about her. Th-yee voth not a Jewa," she concluded, with sly triumph. "She voth—how theya thaya?—a pura bloodeda Nordica Aryana girla, and th-yee vould like to have donna all them murderth, only th-yee don' happen to thinka of them till too lata."

"You think that a Jewess would have been less liberal-minded, Mrs. Zacharias?" Mrs. Bradley enquired with interest.

"Vell, there-th th-tilla the law of Motheth," Mrs. Zacharias reminded her. "Yeth, and it includth an eya for an eya, and a tootha for a tootha," she added, with a gleam of stark hatred, before she again directed her smiling attention to her visitor. "I bega your pardon. You voth thayink abouta the murder of Thmitha. I don' conthentrate like I th-youlda. It'th lika I tella Dadda—I'm gettink olda."

"At what time did you leave the 'Rat and Cow-catcher,' Mrs. Zacharias?"

"Me? Oh, I don' knowa. Tventy to ten, voth it? I can' thay, to a ticka."

"You got home here, Momma, at ten minutes to ten by the grandfather," remarked Councillor Zacharias mildly, "and Benny keeps the grandfather right by the B.B.C."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Bradley, making a note. "And whom did you leave with Councillor Smith, Mrs. Zacharias? Do you remember?"

"Vy th-youldn' I remember? Becauth—I tell you—it'th a good choke, thith ith—I…"

"Momma!" said Councillor Zacharias, suddenly. "Momma! You are acting very silly, telling all your business to strangers this way! Now shut up, Momma, before you get into mischief."

"Oh, calma yourthelf, Dadda! I ain't a foola!"

"I take it, then, Mrs. Zacharias," said Mrs. Bradley, studying the agitated Councillor Zacharias with close but kindly interest, "that you were the last person to leave Councillor Smith that evening? That, in short, as far as we can tell, you could have been the person who poisoned his drink?"

"Vell, I thinka that'th tho," Mrs. Zacharias agreed. "I never theen nobody elth go vith him ven I left him, although Vodtha, the Landlorda, thayth he'th took badda ven I'm gone."

"Why were you left until last?"

"Becauth I'm the treath-yurer of courtha," Mrs. Zacharias replied, as though she were surprised that anybody should want to ask such a question, "and I hada to geta him to cougha up the money, tho I voth kepta a bit. That'th all."

"Very satisfactory, too," said Mrs. Bradley, making another note. "Had Councillor Smith ordered another drink when you left him, do you know?"

Mrs. Zacharias chuckled.

"He thaid he th-yould have the latht von on the houtha," she replied. "They doa that von free at the 'Rat and Cow-catcher,' it theemtha."

"Did he seem quite well when you left him?"

"He gava me the money all righta," said Mrs. Zacharias, as though this explained a good deal, "and I wrota him a retheipta. I gotta the carbon, if you'd like to thee it. But, ath I thaya, Voodtha, whooth not a badda little manna, thayth he vent out very quicka after I lefta, and never came backa for hith drinka."

“Even though it was on the house?”

“That’th righta. On the houtha, anda he never finithed it. He muthta felt badda, Voodth thaid.”

• CHAPTER 16 •

Dog, Apparition, or Bandog?
Title to an illustration to *John Jasper's Secret*, in the manner of Fildes.

• 1 •

"What was the row about the new Public Bath?" asked Mrs. Bradley of the inspector next day.

"Glad you've come to see me at last!" He grinned. "I thought you'd forgotten I existed. I don't know any particular row about the new Public Bath. There are always rows when it comes to anything new. Look at the fuss there was over Councillor Watson's father. A mere question of lead, oak, or elm. But do you think it could be settled amicably? And that was a presentation coffin, mark you, and no time to spare in getting it made!"

"No, but this might be rather important. There seems to have been words between Councillor Smith and Councillor Zacharias about the new Public Bath, and in the course of these words Councillor Smith called Councillor Zacharias a dirty Jew, and Councillor Zacharias called Councillor Smith a sponge. Does that sort of conversation go on as a rule in Council meetings? Is it regarded, so to speak, as the healthy give and take of the House? Or would it be an historic occasion, and entered as such on the minutes?"

"Ordered to be expunged from the minutes, more probably. I don't know, I'm sure. Why don't you get hold of Councillor Commy? He's never been absent from a Council meeting yet. He had an illuminated address presented to him in June to indicate that the fact had not escaped the notice of his unfortunate fellow-Councillors."

Mrs. Bradley cackled, and only by displaying sudden agility did he escape being prodded in the ribs.

"No, but honestly," he said, "you're on the wrong tack there. Old Daddy Zacharias wouldn't hurt a fly. He's a dear chap, and frightfully charitable and kind. And he makes jokes against himself for being a Jew. Takes off Issy Bonn, and tells people about the time he met Julian Rose, and all that sort of thing. And he's fearfully orthodox. He'd no more think of killing anybody than of walking ten miles on the Sabbath Day, and I can't say fairer than that."

"No, you certainly can't. But what about Mrs. Zacharias?"

"Ah, there you have me. I like the old girl immensely. I think she's enormous fun. I had her for my partner once in a local charity bridge tournament, and, boy, can she play bridge! We walked through that tournament like a couple of tanks crossing a series of little ditches. My only fear was lest I should let her down."

"But she's a dark horse?"

"So far as I'm concerned. She's the brains of the establishment, of course. They've got pots of money, I believe! Abie wanted the kids to go to Oxford, but they wouldn't. I bet that eldest boy of theirs knows some War Office secrets, though, that would surprise you. He's one of our star turns. Oh, you can come off the Zacharias family for murder. They're too big for it, and Momma is the biggest of the lot."

"Yes, but what about somebody making a little evidence to put the murder of Smith where it doesn't belong?" suggested Mrs. Bradley.

"Are you expecting that?"

"Yes, and shortly. The murderer thinks that a trap has been baited with our Mr. Burt as the cheese."

"And was he?"

"No, child. I would not risk Mr. Burt's valuable life like that. No. What Mr. Burt has let himself in for is Mr. Burt's own fault. But I'm glad he's safe in hospital for the present."

"Tender-hearted about him, aren't you?"

"Yes and no, child. Our Mr. Burt has large feet, and sometimes isn't sure where he's going to put them. As I'm not sure either, I am glad to be free from the nervous strain of having to wait and see."

“The thing is,” said Stallard, a day or two later, “that although Mrs. Zacharias—bless her heart!—left last, it is equally true that Mrs. Commy-Platt—blast her for a loser of prize Pekinese dogs and a platinum and gold bracelet, once, in a taxi!—left first.”

“Meaning,” said Mrs. Bradley, “that you would sooner suspect Mrs. Platt than Mrs. Zacharias. And, of course,” she added, “there is still the suspicious business of the night-gown. Have you got any further with that?”

“Not a step. What’s far worse, from our point of view, we’re not a step nearer finding out the identity of the dead woman who was wearing that night-gown. You know, Aunt Adela—sorry! Sally again!—I wish you’d get on to that end of it for us. If the woman had been some poor beggar tramping the roads and living gipsyish, we should have to leave it at that, I suppose, and concentrate on the murders of Smith and the girl Fletcher. But although we’re as far away from being able to say who she was as ever we were, she certainly had been cared for. The doctor thought she might have been a patient at a mental hospital at some time, but he went chiefly on her appearance…”

“Her face?”

“Yes, and her cranial development.”

“Not very sound,” said Mrs. Bradley.

“I know. Still, your own researches into the business of the night-gown led you to think she might have been in an asylum, didn’t they? And we worked that for all we were worth. But there isn’t a public mental hospital in the length and breadth of England that has a female patient unaccounted for. And she hadn’t walked far—the state of her feet showed that—and she was found drowned (according to Eddie Burt) in the river here, and…”

“‘Uncle Tom Cobleigh and all,’” said Mrs. Bradley. “What about the private asylums? A far more likely field.”

“Well, we turned our friend Lecky inside out after you’d been there and tipped us off about his reputation (which rumour had wised us up about previously, by the way), but couldn’t get at anything very much. I have a suspicion that place goes in for private gambling on a pretty big scale, but he’s downy, all right. I doubt whether we shall ever catch him out. The people go there all right, but presumably they go to visit their relations the patients. It sounds as though it ought to be easy enough to break up a story

like that, but actually it isn't. There've been no official complaints of any kind, and the patients are quite well cared for, so what can we do?"

"I don't know why you think I want you to do anything, child. By the way, why hasn't Mrs. Commy-Platt been murdered?"

"Well, I know it should be looked upon as a public duty to get rid of her, but…"

"No, child! I'm perfectly serious. Why was Councillor Smith murdered?"

"I've no idea. Fellow was a bit of a lout, it's true, but perfectly O.K. and pretty generally popular. Had one of the cleanest records on the Council, I should say. No graft, no handing over of Council contracts for his own or his relations' benefit, always stood up for the poor, and stuck to having bathrooms and parlours for the Council housing estate when some of the die-hards didn't want 'em…"

"Well, then, why was he murdered?"

"Well, we're still keeping a matey eye on his relatives, you know. They've inherited quite a bit through the old boy's death, and their alibis ain't too good."

"I suppose the poison was intended for him?"

"What did you make of the relatives at the inquest?" Stallard enquired, as though this were an answer to her question. "You remember you read the report from the *Record*'s files?"

"I haven't quite decided. I don't think they liked their uncle. I think perhaps he was not, at home, the kindly man you have indicated. A man's conduct in public and in the bosom of his family are often so widely different as to be complementary of one another. They say it takes all sorts to make a world. It would be equally true to say that it takes all sorts to make a man. There certainly was no grief in that house, I should say, when it was learned there that Uncle Smith would not walk into it again."

"I wish I felt justified in arresting 'em—one or both. But, you see, I've a hunch—a real policeman's whisper—that the three deaths are all connected. If they are, then I don't see how Smith's niece and nephew can possibly be involved. If they're not…but, hang it all, it would be a bit too much of a coincidence if three murders all happened in one town and every one was done by a different person."

"Two might be connected and the other one a separate matter," suggested Mrs. Bradley helpfully.

"Don't say you believe that!"

"I think it is a possibility, child."

"Oh, my sainted aunt! You were sent to torment me. Anyhow, drop me a hint, and let me arrest someone quick!"

"No, child. I think I know Smith's murderer, but it is of no use for me to drop you a hint, because I haven't any proof, otherwise you could make your arrest to-morrow. But it wouldn't do. You'd never be allowed to hold the murderer on the evidence I could place before you at present."

"Tell me, anyway. I've got my own ideas, you know."

"No, child. It wouldn't be fair."

"To the murderer?"

"No; to you." And from this attitude all a handsome young man's persuasive powers could not budge her.

"Isn't she hard-hearted?" said Pat, who had pushed in, regardless of the inspector's scowls, during the latter part of the conversation. "Inspector, my editor wants to know whether we can print this letter complaining about the special constables."

"No, you can't."

"Why not?"

"Bad for discipline, young woman. If the Specials start getting into the local paper, Constable Commy will want to know why he can't figure in the correspondence column."

"Constable Commy?" Mrs. Bradley enquired.

"Yes," said Pat, giggling. "Councillor Commy's son. We don't dare mention him to Mrs. Commy-Platt. She thinks the police are low."

She dodged the official notebook which the inspector threw, and departed, still giggling.

"She's keen, you know, that kid," remarked the inspector, walking towards the door to pick up the notebook. "She's working the *Daily Hooter* for a Fleet Street job, and she thinks she's going to land it."

"Well, she scooped Fleet Street very nicely over these local murders, I suppose."

"You bet she did. Pat wouldn't miss a chance like that. And, for the local paper, I think the editor might have done worse than he did do."

"What was that?"

"Handed her his front page for a fortnight. The *Record* only comes out once a week, in the ordinary way, you know. But she kept the London

dailies fed for five days. Pretty good for local talent, what?"

"Yes, she's a promising girl," said Mrs. Bradley. "I suppose that Fleet Street has always been her goal?"

"It is with most reporters, I suppose, but, as she's a female, poor kid, she'll probably end up in a sub-editor's chair on a woman's journal—if she's lucky!"

"I thought that, except for Madame Tabouis, women journalists usually married young and settled down to write novels."

"Isn't Madame Tabouis married?"

"I cannot say, child. All I know is that one could scarcely call anyone quite so dynamic, forceful, informed, and entirely sophisticated, settled down."

"No. Well, look here, dig up that drowned woman's past and find out why she was murdered, and I'll swear to be your slave for life."

"No, I'll engage you as my trumpeter," said Mrs. Bradley solemnly. "And now I want to know where to find Constable Commy."

Constable Commy was a serious, fresh-faced young policeman, the last-born of a very large family.

"I'm going to ask what may seem an impertinent question, Constable," Mrs. Bradley observed. "Do you mind telling me in exactly what blood-relationship you stand to Mrs. Commy-Platt?"

The constable stared straight in front of him, and replied stolidly:

"She would be my second cousin—that is, my cousin once removed."

"Indeed? Your father's cousin, then?"

"Yes, ma'am. Her maiden name would be Commy, like to ours, and her dad would be, like, my dad's dad's brother."

"Yes, I see. That's clear, then. Now, Constable, has Mrs. Commy-Platt any other relatives besides your father and his family?"

"Well," said Constable Commy, meeting her eyes for the first time, "well, thereby, as it where, ma'am, hangs a tale."

"Take your time, Constable," said Mrs. Bradley genially.

"It's a longish story, mam, and right glad I'd be, being on the side of the law, as you might say, to have it all cleared up."

"Well, take a seat, Constable. I am all agog."

"You will be," responded the constable with lugubrious enjoyment, "When you've took in what I have to say."

Mrs. Bradley sighed ecstatically.

"Pray begin," she said.

"Well, it was like this 'ere. You've seen Mrs. Platt. You've even, we'll say, took her in."

"Yes, do let's say that," Mrs. Bradley agreed with a nod.

"Well, time was—so I've heered my father say, when Mrs. P.—Miss Pandora Commy as was then—was left all alone in the world by both her parents. Her nearest relation was my father, and he was only a cousin. Well, Pandora, she had a friend—a younger young woman than herself…"

"How much younger?"

"Say six or seven years, near enough, from what I'm told. Well, these two, they lived on I dunno quite what, except they took in sewing."

Mrs. Bradley made a valiant mental effort to imagine Mrs. Commy-Platt taking in sewing, but failed.

"And it come to pass, as these things do, that Mrs. Platt—Pandora Commy in them days, as I said—took the eye of her younger friend's brother, as had been in Australia or somewhere, him being a good bit older than his sister, and they were married after a bit, owing to him coming so often to see his sister and him wanting his sister to keep house for him, but she wouldn't leave Pandora. Of course, it didn't happen here in Willington. No, by no means, no. Their home weren't hereabouts at all. They all lived in a smallish town called Pynn, in the south of England, and my father, he lived there, too, in the very same town, for the Commy family had always lived there for generations, it seems. Then all of them, including my own father, come here after the husband died and left Pandora and his sister all the money."

"Oh, I see. He…yes, very interesting. Most."

"Ah, you ain't yet heard the best of it. Now all the rest's mostly gossip, and I can't tell you how it got spread, but Pandora insisted on having the sister to go on living with her, you see, after this Mr. Platt died, and then, when he had been dead a matter of seven years, Mrs. Commy-Platt, as she called herself then—plain Mrs. Platt all the while her husband was alive—she had a bit of misfortune—or fortune, if you think fit to call it such—look at it how you like."

"Indeed? And what was that?"

"Well, it appears that in his will Mr. Platt must have left his money between his wife and his sister. But the sister, it seems, was always just a little bit weak in the head, and Pandora, she handled all the money, and

wrote the cheques for both of 'em and all that, and the way it seemed to work out was that Pandora took the lot really, and just kept the sister to live with her.

"Well, it seems the sister wasn't satisfied, and what with being a bit weak, and being given to dwelling on things, the idea that she wasn't handling the money as her brother intended it, kind of preyed on her.

"She didn't dare stand up to Pandora, as well you can imagine, and she didn't have the gump to take a lawyer into her confidence. She just pined and brooded until she went clean off her onion, and Pandora, she had her put away. Some say the unfortunate creature tried to murder her. Others haves it that she tried to hang herself, and jumped off Pandora's dressing-table to do it. Anyway, Pandora, she washed her hands of her, and after the poor woman was took away, Pandora, she moved out here, and father, he followed her up, because there'll be money there one day, and, although it put wind up her properly, so he keeps out of her way, he don't intend to lose track of it."

"Of course not," said Mrs. Bradley, thinking hard, but not about the future ease and comfort of Councillor Commy.

"Some says," pursued Constable Commy, flattered by the gravity with which his tale was received, "as the place she sent her to was the private house up the hill kept by that there Doctor Lecky. Some says as the poor creature might have recovered in a public asylum and that Pandora never intended she should recover, but I don't talk no scandal, being it is all in the family, as you might say, and not often do I repeat it. But the inspector having made it his special request, I have told you what I've heard. Hearsay, most of it is. But you know what they say, ma'am—never no smoke without fire."

He saluted smartly and walked off. Mrs. Bradley scribbled hieroglyphics in her notebook and went to find the inspector.

"Ask her what you like," said the young man genially, "as long as you don't drag me into it. I confess to being afraid of her. But what made you diagnose a family scandal in the Platt family?"

"In the Commy-Platt family," said Mrs. Bradley. "Two things, child. The first is that Mrs. Platt was obviously very much alarmed when I called upon her on the first occasion. As she could not have known my errand at that time, I can only assume that there was something about which she was

extremely ill at ease. Of course, if she really is administering that poor sister's share of the Platt money, she might well be ill at ease.

"Second she has confessed to me that she believes her life to be threatened. Now, I had no such fear on her behalf until a coincidence struck me."

"Wish one or two would strike me. Something might come of a coincidence or two."

"So I thought, child. Well, here goes. It is odd that two comparatively inoffensive people should be murdered."

"So odd that I've been working, so far, as I seem to have indicated before, on the lines that there must be some connection between the murders. I have failed to establish it, I might add. You know, I tried to get hold of some scandal—an illegitimate baby, or something of that sort, perhaps—Smith had something of a reputation—nothing special, of course—but it all washed out on me. I'll tell you one thing I have noticed, though. Correct me if I'm wrong. Doesn't it seem to you that the deaths were such as would give the maximum, not only of local, but of general, public interest. The murderer has had to compete with the war news, don't forget, and has succeeded. Look at the reports in the paper!"

"Yes, I admit the reports," said Mrs. Bradley. She waved a skinny claw at a file of newspapers which, among them, contained every single published fact about the murders.

"Well, this interests me strangely," said the inspector, "and, before we go any further, I'll tell you why. Take the two murders we've mentioned. I defy you, or anyone else, to tell me of any one person who was present on both occasions when Smith and the telephonist were drugged and afterwards murdered; unless, of course, your theory is that the murderer had an accomplice."

"There was no voluntary accomplice," said Mrs. Bradley, "in the way that you mean. But I have a theory that Councillor Smith forestalled his murderer, in a sense. The amount of arsenic he took was not enough to have killed a healthy person. That reminds me—may I use your telephone?"

"Yes, of course. Can I get you the number you want?"

"I expect so. Please ring up Councillor Woods at the 'Rat and Cow-catcher' and ask him what drink Councillor Smith finished up with on the night he was murdered."

The inspector dialled swiftly, having a head for telephone numbers—it was his boast that he never had to look up a local call—and soon had the information which Mrs. Bradley required.

"Stout," he said laconically. "So apparently it doesn't matter much whether the drug was dropped into the first glass or the last, which is quite a comfort. He drank nothing but stout that evening."

"But he was not in the same company all evening," Mrs. Bradley reminded him.

"But, darling Aunt Adela," said the inspector, reverting to what he felt was the principal subject of conversation, "do please explain how you make out…"

"Certainly not, to a child of your intelligence," said Mrs. Bradley severely.

"But I've been making lists of people in my head until I've got a headache. They don't coincide in the slightest."

"Make them on paper, and have another look."

"Well, with Smith there were those Councillors' wives, and Mrs. Platt. You don't suggest one of them did it? On the other occasion it was all those telephonists, recorders, plotting officers, supervisor, and so on—some of them in the men's room. Not one of the Councillors' wives anywhere near the place. None of them do those telephone duties, nor, so far as I can remember, have anything at all to do with that Report Centre. I doubt whether the majority even know where it is."

"You will remember that I don't altogether agree that the three murders were all committed by the same person," said Mrs. Bradley. She did not alter her slight but saurian smile. "How is your fiancee?" she asked suddenly.

The question seemed irrelevant to the inspector, and he answered it briefly with a grin. Mrs. Bradley nodded slowly and rhythmically.

"You will please ring up Mrs. Platt," she said, "and ask her when it will be convenient for me to call on her again."

The inspector dialled, but after a brief pause, during which Mrs. Bradley could hear the 'phone bell ringing in Mrs. Commy-Platt's hall, he looked at her and said:

"I don't think you're going to be lucky. Here you are."

Mrs. Commy-Platt, said the maid, had left the house for the country. She feared there might be air raids. She had left no address. The servants

had orders to go home, and were to be put on board-wages.

• CHAPTER 17 •

Brent geese flighting under a mackerel sky.
Title of a painting by Peter Scott.

• 1 •

Failing an audience of Mrs. Platt, Mrs. Bradley decided that next in order of interesting persons was the relatives of the late Councillor Smith. She was as enthralled as Pat Mort had been by the celluloid tongue which leapt at her with its legend when she pressed what she thought was the bell. A joke on the part of Councillor Smith, she decided. It accorded with what she already knew of his sense of humour.

The neat door, when she knocked, was opened by Melchior Blackburn, who stood there, grimly suspicious, holding on to the door as though it lent him moral support, and gazed at her with so much hostility that Mrs. Bradley felt impelled to declare that she was not soliciting alms, either on her own behalf or that of other people.

This declaration did nothing to soften him.

"Well, what do you want?" he said. He had opened the door so narrowly that it was nothing more than a frame for his small, pale visage. He was wearing an expensive dark suit and a black tie.

"If you are Mr. Smith's nephew, I have something to tell you," said Mrs. Bradley.

"As Mr. Smith's nephew, I've not the slightest desire to hear what you have to say," retorted Melchior. He was about to shut the door when his sister called out from behind him:

"Let her in, Mel. I know who it is."

"Come in, please," said the young man.

Mrs. Bradley, seated on a large settee, in a slightly over-furnished, but comfortable, warm, bright room, looked at the pair with interest. Melchior's

pale face was intelligent; his sister, who was not like him in appearance—it was a case where each child, Mrs. Bradley surmised, had inherited to a striking degree the more obvious physical characteristics of one parent only—and who sat on the arm of her brother's chair with her hand on his shoulder, as though to hold him in check, looked, however, the more resolute of the pair.

"I am investigating the deaths of three persons, not only the death of your uncle," Mrs. Bradley commenced.

"I thought that was a job for the police," said Melchior, eyeing her distastefully.

"Don't Mel," said his sister. "Mrs. Bradley is in with the inspector. Don't queer the pitch until we've heard what she's come for."

"This," said Mrs. Bradley. "While it is possible—even likely—that one or other or both of you killed your uncle, there is no reason whatever to imagine that you killed an unknown lunatic or Miss Fletcher, the Report Centre telephonist.

"As the police theory is that all three murders were committed by the same person or persons, I have come here on the assumption that neither of you is guilty."

"Thanks for nothing," said Melchior. "As we happen to labour under the same idea ourselves, we are, naturally, grateful for your kindly assurances."

"Oh, do be quiet, Mel!" said his sister. "There's nothing to be gained by being rude."

"It's like this," said Mrs. Bradley. "It seems pretty clear that your uncle was poisoned at the inn called the 'Rat and Cow-catcher,' where he met five of the leading women of this town—Councillors' wives and one a Councillor herself. If we can establish that this poisoning did take place at that inn on that night, we can, I assume, prove that neither of you could have had anything to do with your uncle's death."

"We were only suspected on the question of motive," said Melchior, relaxing his sullen frown. "It could not be shown at the inquest or afterwards that either of us had been anywhere near the 'Rat and Cow-catcher' that night. The trouble was that we couldn't prove how we had spent the evening. As a matter of fact, obeying uncle's orders, as usual, we had merely stayed at home in case any of his cronies should call."

"Was he expecting anybody to call?"

“Not that I know of. It wouldn’t have been anyone important, anyhow. But it was one of his fads that the house must never be left empty. It was as much as Elvira’s life was worth to go up to London on a morning train, for example, wasn’t it, El?”

“Oh, yes. He was funny like that.”

“Glad you call it funny,” said her brother.

“Now, Mr. Blackburn, I’m going to ask you a question which I expect you’ve been asked before, but please don’t refuse to answer on that account. Would you mind telling me whether you were surprised to hear that your uncle was dead, and had been murdered?”

“This isn’t a law court, and so I may take liberties with the question. I’ve been asked it before, and to you I shall give the answer I’ve already given to the police, because it’s the true answer; but I’ll elaborate a little, if you like.”

“Good. Go ahead, Mr. Blackburn.”

“Well, crudely, then, I was absolutely amazed to hear that my uncle was dead. Now please don’t misunderstand me. I knew all about my uncle’s gastric juices. I also knew, however, that they were likely to function for a good many more years than, from my point of view, was desirable. Of course, I never allowed for the effect of poison on them.”

“Thank you, Mr. Blackburn.”

“Yes, but I haven’t finished. It was like this: I had been trying for some time to get my uncle to take me into his business. He was a coal merchant, you know, and I could easily have done a spot of clerking or some accountancy or something. Well, he wouldn’t. I was lucky, he said, to have him to live on and depend on, when I couldn’t hold a job down for myself.

“Perhaps you wonder why this was? I’ll tell you. What’s more, I’ll tell you the truth. The fact is, Mrs. Bradley…”

“No, Mel! You’ll only be sorry!” said his sister.

“No, El, I shan’t. Mrs. Bradley has introduced herself to us as a psychologist, and now, of course, I know why her name seemed familiar. She’ll understand in a way that an ordinary person couldn’t. That fact is, Mrs. Bradley, I’m a kleptomaniac. That’s why I can’t hold a job. I’ve had treatment—almost more of it than I could stand—it gave me brain fever—I went completely insane for a time after I’d been in the hands of one of the quacks who masquerade as members of your profession.

"I'm not cured, of course. The only thing is that El, here, understands that I can't be accountable for…picking and stealing…and she keeps an eye on me, and…keeps me straight. A nice life for her, and, of course, it puts us both pretty completely into my uncle's power, as you can imagine.

"So, to hear that he was dead, and that everything he had had belonged to us, overwhelmed me with amazement. I can do what I like now—go where I like. El has trained herself to have eyes in the back of her head where I'm concerned, so that, as we shall always go out together, I need feel no alarm about my rather embarrassing affliction."

"I can cure you," said Mrs. Bradley calmly.

"Yes, I know," the young man answered at once. "That's why I've told you all about it."

• 2 •

"I told you they had the whale of a motive," said the inspector, when Mrs. Bradley described her visit to the Blackburns. "Where are you off to now?"

"To visit my friend Doctor Lecky, and, more particularly, my friend his red-haired patient," Mrs. Bradley replied.

"Good luck. I'd like to jug that old buster. I'm sure he's up to no good. Are you still on the track of the night-gown?"

"Yes. That night-gown has a long and curious tale."

"I thought only shirts had tails. No! Pax! I didn't mean it! You've got horribly bony fingers for delicate ribs like mine!"

Mrs. Bradley took herself off, and all the way up the hill to Doctor Lecky's private mental hospital, or, as he preferred to call it, convalescent home, she was thinking about the Blackburn brother and sister, and wondering whether there was anything else they might have been persuaded to tell her. The inspector was still deeply impressed by the fact that the Blackburns had gained so much by Councillor Smith's death, but was willing to admit that unless that death had had some connection with the other two deaths—he was still convinced that there had been only one murderer—their motive must in itself be deemed an insufficient one.

"I must hold on to him tightly," Mrs. Bradley thought, when she had taken light leave of him at his headquarters, "or he'll make an arrest before I'm ready for it, even now."

She passed the reedy lake, the long brick wall, and the sorry-looking football pitches on the common, and came very soon to the frontage of Doctor Lecky's house.

The weather was raw that morning, although no rain had fallen, and there was nothing to be seen of the red-haired woman on the lawn. Mrs. Bradley walked briskly up the still unweeded drive, but this time there was no sign of the Pickwickian Doctor Lecky. The great door, paint badly needed, was firmly closed. She dragged at an enormous, old-fashioned bell-knob, and heard the clanging dying away in the backstair regions somewhere, and had to pull it again before it was answered, and a servant opened the door.

The servant went with the house, Mrs. Bradley thought. She was heavy and looked unkempt, and yet there was something about her which suggested better days, a more spacious, loveable life, and greater independence than she was enjoying at the time.

"Not at home, madam," she said.

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Bradley. "Take my card."

She handed it in a yellow talon. The woman automatically wiped her fingers on her apron before she took it. She then shut the door, and Mrs. Bradley was left to gaze at the creeper on the wall, or, if she preferred it (and she did) at the cedar trees on the lawn.

In a minute or two the door was opened again, this time by Doctor Lecky.

"Ah, Doctor Lestrange Bradley," he said. "I am sorry that my sense of self-preservation overcame me in quite such a primitive manner when first you called to see me. I am obliged to be careful. I have to make certain that the police…"

"Never mind that now," said Mrs. Bradley, "I want to talk to you."

"About night-gowns again, dear lady?"

"About night-gowns again, if you like. They are washed on the premises, of course?"

In a large, dark-panelled room which was heated by a small radiator, and decorated with two rather poor reproductions of pictures by Paolo Veronese, Mrs. Bradley continued the conversation by enquiring after the red-haired patient.

"Well, you ought to know more about her than I do, you know," said Lecky, with a puzzled stare. "You took her away."

“Ah, yes, of course I did. No, I don’t mean the red-haired patient. I know why I thought of her, though. I really meant Miss Platt. But you’re shy of that subject, aren’t you? Very well. I withdraw my enquiries about her. Now for the night-gown.”

The effect of these remarks on Doctor Lecky was startling. He half rose from his chair, sat back again, made a constrained gurgling noise, and suddenly uttered the single syllable:

“Christ!”

“I see,” said Mrs. Bradley, pleasantly. “May I use your telephone?”

She went to it and dialled the police.

“Inspector, come here at once and arrest Doctor Lecky,” she said. She glanced at the doctor, who, with suffused face, was tugging wildly at his stiff but slightly grimy collar, and was emitting constricted groans of, Mrs. Bradley thought, a sepulchral character.

“Don’t do anything foolish! Don’t!” he croaked. He fell back, still tugging and choking. Mrs. Bradley put back the receiver and felt his pulse. Then she thoughtfully picked up a very large paper-knife from the table, and poised it defensively so that when he came to himself it should be the first object upon which his possibly hopeful eyes would fall.

This interesting and impressive tableau was broken up by the arrival of the police.

“What do you charge him with?” the inspector rather dubiously enquired.

“Anything for which he can’t get bail,” said Mrs. Bradley gently. The unfortunate man gave a strangled yelp of dismay at this medieval reply.

“You can’t do that,” he said.

“No, we can’t do that,” said the inspector.

“Charge him with kidnapping, then,” said Mrs. Bradley, grinning. “You’ve got a warrant, haven’t you?”

The inspector caught the flutter of her left eyelid, the one farther from Lecky, and cheerfully accepted the cue.

“Oh, warrant, yes,” he said. “I suppose I’d better read it to him.”

“Don’t bother,” said Lecky, his cheeks fallen in and pale. “I’ve been arrested before. I know the procedure.”

“That’s awkward,” said the inspector under his breath. He glanced at Mrs. Bradley for guidance.

“Before you go with the inspector, Doctor,” she said, “please answer the question I put to you before the police arrived. When did you first miss Miss Platt?”

“I reserve my defence,” said Doctor Lecky.

“Oh, you do, do you?” said the inspector. “Then you’d better get along with the sergeant.”

“Very well,” said Doctor Lecky. “But I don’t see how you tumbled to it,” he added to Mrs. Bradley.

“It was the night-gown, to begin with,” she replied. “And then, of course, Mrs. Platt’s relatives gave away all the rest, and there was the added confirmation of the curious behaviour of the patient with red hair. But why didn’t you go along and identify the body? You must have guessed who it was.”

“I knew who it was,” replied the doctor, “but Mrs. Commy-Platt suggested that it would be as well not to interfere. She pointed out that neither she nor I was to blame for what had happened…”

“The murder, do you mean?” Mrs. Bradley enquired.

“Yes. The first I heard I communicated with her. She’d heard, too, of course.”

“How, exactly, did you hear, Doctor? Sergeant, may he sit down? I particularly want these questions answered.”

The inspector had been scribbling busily. He looked up, caught Mrs. Bradley’s eye, and went on scribbling. The sergeant stood away from his prisoner, who took a seat at his own desk in an office chair, which he swivelled round immediately to face his interlocutor.

“We heard by reading about it in the local and then in the daily paper. That was the same afternoon those boys found her in the tank.”

“Oh, I see. I thought you meant us to understand that you received some private communication.”

“Oh, no, nothing like that. No anonymous letters, thank God.”

“Yes, I suppose you would feel like that about anonymous letters,” said Mrs. Bradley, nodding. “I imagine you have received some dozens of those, in your time.”

“You should say hundreds,” Lecky answered. “I moved out here to get away from the persecution. People are devils. They hunt you. It isn’t the law; it’s your fellow human beings that act like bloodhounds. Bloodhounds? Man-eating tigers, more like.”

"So you and Mrs. Platt were in collusion?"

"Well, when Mrs. Platt tipped me the wink that if it was her late husband's sister, perhaps it would be as well for neither of us to have anything to do with the matter, of course I was all for believing that she was speaking for the best.

"At the first, when we made our arrangements, we didn't understand it might be murder. When that came out we were in Queer Street, because I ought to have reported to the police that Miss Platt had disappeared; and then, of course, I ought to have gone down to the mortuary and identified the body. So ought Mrs. Platt, I suppose, if it comes to that, but she swore she'd swear I hadn't notified her, and, you see, with my previous unfortunate experience…"

"The death of your wife, you mean?" said the inspector.

"Yes. It wasn't very nice for me to be mixed up in anything else."

"You're mixed up in it now, all right," the inspector almost indulgently remarked.

"That he is," said Mrs. Bradley ghoulishly. "One more question, Doctor, and then you can go with the sergeant: what is your theory about the murder of Miss Platt?"

"I…I haven't a theory. I know how she got out of here, if that's what you mean."

"It isn't. But tell me what you can."

"Miss Platt was what we psychologists"—he caught Mrs. Bradley's basilisk eye and gulped—"in short, she had lucid intervals. In one of these fits of sanity she simply walked out of the house."

"In her night-gown, do you suppose?" enquired the inspector.

"No, of course not. No sane person would walk about in her night-gown, and, if a lunatic did, she'd soon be stopped. The whole point is that this woman was sane, either at the time, or just before, she was murdered."

"Did she know the neighbourhood?" asked Mrs. Bradley.

"I shouldn't think so. She had never been outside the grounds before. It was a condition of our keeping her in our charge that a careful watch was to be kept on her when she came to herself. It was known to Mrs. Platt that this would happen."

"Mrs. Platt appears to be the villain of the piece," commented Mrs. Bradley. "Tell me, Doctor Lecky, when did it dawn on you that Miss Platt

was not really a suitable or necessary adjunct (let us say) to a mental home?"

"I…she…oh, she was barmy all right," said Doctor Lecky with confidence. "I never doubted that."

"Perhaps you are not a good judge. When did you miss her?"

"We missed her at our evening meal. It is part of our system to dine publicly—such of us as can—and Miss Platt was one of our more frequent diners in public. She had been particularly lucid for some days, and it was with some surprise that I noticed she was not among us on that particular evening."

"I see. What enquiry did you institute?"

"None."

"None?"

"It was optional on the part of the patients whether they accepted my invitation to dinner or not. Miss Platt had fits of extreme shyness, and I supposed that she was suffering in this way."

"You made no enquiry, then, until the next morning?"

"Not even then. I saw, later on, in the local paper (which comes out, of course, once a week) that some woman had been found drowned in the A.R.P. cistern, but there was nothing to connect her in any way with Miss Platt, and, anyway, I didn't think the paper could have got on to her so soon. It was not until Miss Platt's nurse reported that the bed had not been slept in, that I had any inkling at all that Miss Platt was not in the house. Anyway, I did what I could. I sent to Mrs. Platt and then Mrs. Platt sent her companion, a lady named…"

"Isabella."

"Yes, Isabella, with a note to keep my mouth shut. Then I realised that we were definitely in Queer Street."

"And still are," said the inspector. "If you've finished all the fairy tales, get along. All right, Sergeant."

"I don't think that we should be harsh with our interesting friend," said Mrs. Bradley when the doctor and his escort had gone. "He is more plotted against than plotting."

"Glad you think so," said the inspector. "I can't make head or tail of the thing myself. Mrs. Platt seems a pretty smooth worker. I must get on her track."

“Yes, frighten her,” said Mrs. Bradley. “She’s been blackmailing poor dear Lecky, and, after all, what a subject for blackmail he is! One wonders, in fact, whether he deserves to be otherwise. People who kill their wives and are acquitted seem to be the natural prey of the blackmailer, and I doubt whether we are justified in interfering.”

“But, after all,” argued the inspector, “she couldn’t really have anything against him.”

“His own guilty conscience,” Mrs. Bradley suggested. “At any rate, the main lines of the story seem obvious. Miss Platt ran away from this house, was murdered, and was not identified. Mrs. Platt and Doctor Lecky suspected that the murdered woman was Miss Platt, but neither chose to come forward. Meanwhile, there was just one other interesting feature, didn’t you think?”

“No,” replied the inspector candidly, “I saw no other interesting feature. Spill it.”

“Clothes,” Mrs. Bradley answered. “Come along. The sooner we get to the bottom of this part of the business the better. What about the rest of the patients in this house?”

“Lord knows! How many are there?”

“I don’t know.” She rang a bell. “How many patients are on the books?” she asked the servant.

“I’ll find out, madam.” There was an interval of five minutes. The inspector studied the view of lawn and cedars; Mrs. Bradley scribbled busily.

“There are three private patients, madam.”

“I’ll come and see them.”

She signed to the inspector to remain where he was, and followed the servant out. The girl stopped when they got into the passage.

“Beg pardon, madam,” she said, “but we’re all quite willing to tell all we know, so be we don’t get into trouble ourselves, madam.”

“That’s all right,” said Mrs. Bradley. “There won’t be any trouble. It is not because of the gambling that the doctor has been arrested. You can tell the rest of the staff that they need not worry, although they may be required to give evidence.”

“Thank you, madam. This way, madam. This is Miss Pearce’s room. She’s perfectly harmless, madam.”

Miss Pearce was seated at a table, gazing into a crystal.

“I am clairvoyant,” she announced.

“She always says that, madam,” murmured the maid. “Best to take no notice.”

“But I’m interested,” said Mrs. Bradley. She seated herself opposite the lunatic and smiled. The lunatic smiled back.

“Please tell me my future,” said Mrs. Bradley, stretching out a thin claw to take one of the frail wrists in her steel grasp and feel the pulse.

“Look in the crystal,” said Miss Pearce. Her eyes, large, luminous, and possessive, rested on Mrs. Bradley’s. Mrs. Bradley dropped her eyes and gazed in the crystal sphere. “You are becoming sleepy,” said the lunatic, taking up the crystal. “You are drowsy. You cannot see me any longer. You cannot see what I am doing.” She giggled quietly.

Mrs. Bradley ducked swiftly, and the missile flew past her and shattered a picture.

“Um. Very interesting,” she said, when, having soothed the excited patient by restoring the crystal (fortunately unharmed) to her, and listening intelligently to, and helping to compile, a long list of her own future misfortunes, she joined the maid, who had prudently remained in the passage.

“She’s wicked, that’s what she is! But I must say I’ve never known her do such a thing before,” the girl said, with a rush of combined nervous anger and apology, when Mrs. Bradley came out. “I never ought to have let you go in there, madam, but she’s never been violent before.”

“Where the next?” asked Mrs. Bradley, cutting her short.

“In here. Mr. William. He makes clocks. He won’t do you no harm.”

Mr. William, a bald-headed, childish-looking man of forty or so, was seated at a table on which were heaped the internal workings of not fewer than seventy clocks. Realising that he was completely occupied, Mrs. Bradley shut the door again.

“And the third ought to be my red-haired woman, but isn’t, now I’ve removed her to my clinic,” she said to herself. She looked in, gave the grey-haired inmate some sweets, and sat on the bed to talk to her, for this elderly patient was one who refused (the girl said) to get up. She told Mrs. Bradley a long, rather rambling story—the usual conglomeration of a hypochondriac’s mind. Mrs. Bradley listened patiently.

“I want these three patients transferred,” she said to the inspector. “I suppose I shall have to obtain the consent of the people who are paying

their fees here. They are quite an interesting set. I should like to have them in my Buckinghamshire clinic. I've sent all my London patients there, and these could join them."

"Have you done these any good? You haven't been long about it," grinned the inspector. Mrs. Bradley modestly delivered herself of the opinion that the sphere-hurler was probably feeling better than she had felt for some time.

"I encouraged her to rid herself of an inhibition," she added, "but, of course, I can't do much until I learn the case histories. Our friend Lecky's policy of laissez-faire has done no particular harm, and, to give the man his due, he has fed them well and kept them clean. They are not particularly troublesome, I imagine." She sighed. The inspector raised his eyebrows. "I must confess that the events of the past half-hour have made me homesick for my clinic," she said.

"You can't go back to your clinic yet," said Stallard, taking her arm. "You're going to help me find my murderer first."

"Murderers…well, no, on second thoughts, I believe you are right," said Mrs. Bradley, grinning.

"It's certainly a neater case in the singular," Stallard observed. "So, may I continue to say 'murderer'?"

"You may," Mrs. Bradley replied. "And may I congratulate you on your broad-mindedness?"

The inspector looked at her suspiciously.

• CHAPTER 18 •

A Jade Spear-head with Two Birds: of the Dynasties recently excavated at Am-Yang, shewing mud adhering to it.
Advert.

• 1 •

"So the night-gown," said the inspector thoughtfully, "was a plant. And I've got a real reason now for holding on to Comrade Lecky."

"And what is that, child?" Mrs, Bradley enquired. They were in the inspector's quarters, having tea, and she was pouring out.

"Why, obstructing the police, of course. You see, we went to him when we got the hunch that the woman in the A.R.P. cistern might have been a lunatic…"

"Going by the night-gown, child?"

"Going by the all-important night-gown…and he denied having missed a patient, and had plummed the staff up she'd been sent for and gone home. I don't know how he squared them, but I suppose it was none of their business. That's the British domestic all over. Their pickings came from the gamblers, not the lunatics, so I don't suppose they questioned anything much that Lecky told them in his capacity as a doctor."

"You do realise the true significance of the night-gown, don't you?" said Mrs. Bradley.

"Well, yes, I suppose so. Or don't I? You know best." He grinned at her as he accepted his cup of tea. "Go on, Aunt Adela. Speak your little piece."

"You know," said Mrs. Bradley, "I am disappointed to learn that our relationship is to be, as it were, Platonic. I was given to understand differently at the outset of our acquaintance."

"Eh?"

"And now, you produce a fiancee."

"Are you, by any chance, proposing to me, dear Aunt?"

"No. Although…I don't know," said Mrs. Bradley, her head slightly on one side the better to study his countenance. "No," she added, in stronger, firmer tones (at which he threw back his head and shouted with laughter), "I am not proposing to you, but I understood (on what should have been reliable authority) that my niece Sally fancied that she was in love with you."

"Sally? Don't be indelicate. She's only sixteen or something, isn't she? Besides, she knows I'm engaged. Everybody knows."

"Ah," said Mrs. Bradley, nodding like a mandarin. "Do they indeed? Interesting, illuminating, informative and instructive." She stopped nodding, and drank some tea. The inspector studied her closely.

"And now, come across with it," he said. "You'd never have mentioned Sally in such a connection if you hadn't got something up your sleeve."

"But my sleeve is a conjurer's sleeve," Mrs. Bradley pointed out. "And what is up my sleeve must remain the conjurer's secret for a time. But we digress, child." She took some thin bread and butter—it was before the rationing of food—and ate it meditatively.

"Go on about the night-gown," said the inspector.

"We understand that Miss Platt had lucid intervals. Listening between the lines, as it were, of Doctor Lecky's enthralling conversation, we are forced to the conclusion, it seems to me, that Miss Platt's life had become one long complete lucid interval…"

"In fact," interrupted the inspector with a certain degree of animation, "that she was as sane as we are, and that Lecky, curse his fat face and piggy little eyes, was aware of the fact, and didn't like it. My hat, won't I bounce Mrs. Commy-Platt when I find out where she's gone! Sorry, dear heart. Carry on."

"Miss Platt contrived to escape, probably—in fact, I think, inevitably—with a certain amount of assistance from the murderer's unwitting (at first) accomplice."

"From the…gosh! I say! That's a bit of a mouthful, isn't it?"

"Quite clever, yes," said Mrs. Bradley modestly.

"Go on."

“This accomplice supplied the clothes of which Miss Platt was in need. She escaped, I expect, in her night-gown. Once Lecky knew she was sane, he had to circumvent her attempts at escaping from the Home because he was afraid of Mrs. Commy-Platt, and felt that he would be blamed if Miss Platt went to Mrs. Platt’s house to claim her rights.”

“Oh, I see! Like your red-haired woman, she was only given a night-gown to put on over her underclothing. Simple but profound. Go on.”

“The accomplice procured outdoor clothing for the victim, but retained possession of the night-gown and put it back on the corpse. We can’t prove that at present, because we can’t prove that the body in the tank was the same body as that which our friend Edward Burt dragged out of the river. Still, we can assume that they were the same.”

“Ah, yes. Burt. How is he now, by the way?”

“It would be a lot safer if I could persuade you to arrest him, too, and keep him away from people as you’re going to keep Doctor Lecky. Lecky’s is a valuable life, and I hope we shall be able to preserve it.”

“Don’t tell me I’ve arrested that lovely specimen just to save him from the murderer!”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that, child, no. But we shall need him—I presume that we are speaking of Doctor Lecky—at the trial. He is worth preserving.”

“A fine witness he’ll make, with his record, I should imagine!”

“But he hasn’t got a record, child. That’s only our nasty minds. He was discharged without a stain on his character. You seem to forget that the unfortunate fellow was acquitted. It is because he had the misfortune to be wrongly accused that certain wicked people in this town had the temerity to make him a tool with which to force their vile ends.

“The man should be pitied, not censured. Any intelligent jury will be able to understand that!”

The inspector gave a rude little hoot of laughter and quoted poetry under his breath. Then he added:

“Go on. You grow strangely interesting, dear Aunt. There’s only one thing more I want to know.”

“There’s a good boy,” said Mrs. Bradley. “More tea? And some more bread and butter?”

“Thanks. Well, look, the murderer. I understand all about that poor soul from the Home, but why kill Councillor Smith and that poor kid

Fletcher? I still can't see the connection."

"You've got the wrong end of the stick," said Mrs. Bradley. "Did you ever hear of burning the grass to stop a prairie fire?"

• 2 •

The fishmonger weighed a pound of herrings.

"'Wholesome, filling and cheap,'" said Mrs. Bradley, halting in the doorway of the shop.

"I don't know about filling or cheap," said the woman who was buying them. "And even wholesome—well, I don't know, neither, not if you go swallowing the bones."

"True," replied Mrs. Bradley, conceding the point with her usual charm. "I think perhaps I'll have haddock. Smoked, please, Mr. Dewey, and a nice thick one. Yes, that will do."

"A piece of haddick's always nice," said the other customer approvingly, "but they get fair sick of it at home. At least, my Len do, and his father never would touch it. Said it reminded him of cheese, which he can't bear neither, though I can't see why, can you?"

As Mrs. Bradley was uncertain, from the context, whether she was being asked to pass an opinion upon a possible resemblance between haddock and cheese, or upon the customer's husband's aversion to one, the other, or both of these foods, she contented herself with observing, genially, that for the life of her she could not. This closed the amicable conversation, and the other customer left.

Mr. Dewey wrapped the haddock in brown paper as well as white paper and newspaper—for the war was yet young—and remarked that El and Con were late to work that morning.

"Expect they had a yellow," he observed. Through Mrs. Bradley's mind thoughts of a motoring summons, alcoholic refreshment, ladies of the town, and an attack of nerves passed in quick succession, and she was about to enquire which, if any, of these aids to an interesting and varied life had been experienced by his sons that they should be late for work, when Mr. Dewey saved her from the betrayal of her ignorance by continuing:

"Of course, we never hear about the yellow, like, without we've somebody in the A.R.P. They don't sound the sirens for yellow, only for

red."

"Ah," said Mrs. Bradley, seeing the light. "So they received a yellow last night, or so you think?"

"Well, we're in the thick, as you may say, my boys are, till they're called up, you know. I'm a warden myself. Might not think it, but I am. Have a bit of fun we do, sometimes, when we have a practice, you know."

Mrs. Bradley, with vivid memories of Lady Selina's maledictions upon the last local A.R.P. manoeuvres, during which (unwisely, as her daughter Sally zealously but unnecessarily pointed out) she had permitted herself to be assisted on to a stretcher and inserted into an ambulance, replied that she did know.

"And I suppose you don't see as much of your bed as you used to do?" she added.

From this it was a short step, and one easily achieved by Mr. Dewey, to another conversation about the now intensely interesting night-gown in which the body of Miss Platt had been clothed when she was found in the A.R.P. cistern.

"Repeat my arguments? Certainly," he exclaimed, and, with great gusto, interrupted two or three times by the entrance of other customers, he repeated the tale of Mrs. Commy-Platt and the laundry.

"Yes," said Mrs. Bradley, "but there's one thing I'd like to know. When Mrs. Platt gave away clothes to poorer people, didn't they pick out the laundry mark?"

"Ah, there you have me. Couldn't say. I suppose they'd mostly do the washing at 'ome. But 'ave you 'ad a look at the night-gown, then?"

"Yes, at police headquarters."

"Oh, you 'ave. What, the one as come over the wall."

"Yes."

"And was the laundry mark picked out?"

"I can't say. The only mark that the eye could detect was the laundry mark assigned to Mrs. Murdon."

The unregenerate fishmonger began to gurgle with retrospective joy.

"I dunno what my old woman would say if I had to go into court and take my davy I recognised it wasn't Mrs. Murdon's," he observed. "But I don't think some'ow it's going to come to that. Anyway, Min Murdon swore it wasn't hers, and the police believed her, there being no connection."

“It’s very interesting indeed,” said Mrs. Bradley. “But the most interesting thing of all is that you should have recognised the night-gown as having come from Doctor Lecky’s home. The dead woman had been an inmate there, we think.”

“You don’t say that! You see! Them teeth-marks proved it, as prove it I knowed they would!”

“Moreover, we have reason to believe that the dead woman was related by marriage to Mrs. Commy-Platt.”

“Crikey!”

“Yes. Things look rather bad for Mrs. Platt. Are you friendly with the people who run the laundry?”

“Ah. Me and him plays bowls.”

“So that if I wanted to be introduced to the proprietor as an acquaintance of yours…?”

“Nothing easier. When?”

“To-morrow evening, say?”

“You couldn’t join us at the ‘Rat and Cow-catcher’? That’s where we haves our mid-week pint.”

“With pleasure. At about eight o’clock?”

“Suit me. Can’t do much to-morrow, see, as I shan’t be frying.”

• 3 •

Mrs. Bradley, from her bedroom at Lady Selina’s house, rang up the editor of the *Record*.

“It’s about the murders,” she said. “Doctor Lecky has been arrested, as you know, and it is of vital importance to the case that you should send a reporter to get an account of to-night’s meeting of the Council on the question of Councillor Clark’s scheme for levying rates on pew-rents.”

“I can’t get a reporter in to that.”

“You must.”

“But my boys would be thrown out. Even Eves couldn’t do it. Don’t you know that the Council don’t allow their meetings to be reported?”

“Look here, try Miss Mort, then. She’s an efficient youngster. Can’t she get herself in?”

“I’ll see. Here, talk to her yourself.”

"No, no. It isn't necessary. Tell her it is essential that she should be there, and that I want her to report, unedited, by half-past ten to-night."

"What's the big idea? Can't you tell us that? How could the Council meeting affect the case?"

"It won't. But I have very good reason to suppose that the person who killed poor Councillor Smith will be there, and I want Pat to keep her eyes open, and report—privately, of course—anything odd or suspicious. Don't tell her what I've just said, though. I don't want the girl to feel nervous."

"All right. Hold on a minute…She says depend on her. She'll gate-crash the Council Chamber somehow, if she has to go disguised as Mrs. Platt."

Mrs. Bradley, well satisfied, rang off, and went to have tea off her haddock. Lady Selina, returning hungry after an exhaustive inspection of the local Knitting for the Navy Association, ate a share of the haddock with gusto.

"You know, Adela," she said, between mouthfuls, "I still don't see why you insisted that Sally should be sent away like that. I assure you that she has not the very slightest thought about this young policeman. And I shouldn't allow it if she had."

"Her life was threatened," said Mrs. Bradley calmly. "Yours might have been, if the murderer had thought of you sooner, but I think you're now comparatively safe."

Lady Selina looked incredulous.

"I suppose you are speaking responsibly, Adela," she said, "but it all sounds ridiculous to me."

With the air of one who is determined not to encourage nonsense, she took a second piece of fish and dropped an extra lump of butter on it before she added pepper.

"Very well, Selina," said Mrs. Bradley meekly. "By the way, I shall not be in to dinner. I am drinking a pint of beer with two gentlemen at the 'Rat and Cow-catcher' at eight o'clock this evening."

At seven (the Council meeting began at half-past) she rang up the *Record* office again and asked to speak to Pat.

"Keep a special watch on anybody who comes in late," she said. "How long do you think you'll need to stay?"

"Until the end, if there's going to be any excitement."

In getting to the “Rat and Cow-catcher” Mrs. Bradley took extraordinary precautions. She caught a bus in the opposite direction to that in which her destination lay, and got off at the railway station. From here she went in by train—a roundabout, lengthy route, but one which brought her almost to the door of the inn, so that she had only a step or two to walk.

She slipped inside, and found her cavaliers already seated at a small table in the saloon bar.

“We generally goes in the Public Bar for ours,” confided Mr. Dewey, who was less appealing to the eye in his (Mrs. Bradley deduced) best clothes than in his shirt-sleeves and fishmonger’s apron, “but thought you’d prefer it in here.”

“Very kind and thoughtful of you,” Mrs. Bradley returned.

“Meet Mr. Macanallan,” continued Mr. Dewey, this time hoarsely and with a certain amount of diffidence. Clearly, he recognised some definite class distinction, and in the other’s favour, between himself and the proprietor of the laundry.

Mr. Macanallan nodded. He was a melancholy-looking man, cadaverous and dignified. He ordered gin with his beer, and poured it in a ruminating sort of way, working his mouth slightly, like a sad cow chewing a cud which it had reason to believe is not altogether of the best.

“At your service,” he observed distastefully. Mrs. Bradley thought it as well, however, to leave the question of the night-gown to the second glass of beer. That this policy was justified appeared certain when Mr. Macanallan looking up from his beaker and eyeing her over the rim severely, but no longer distastefully, observed with considerable gloom:

“Is it the night-dress you’re after?”

“It is,” said Mrs. Bradley. Mr. Macanallan shook his head, and licked a fleck of beery foam from the left side of his mouth with a tongue which flickered in and out like that of a chameleon.

“I couldn’t tell the right and wrong of it at all,” he said dejectedly.

“There’s only one thing I want to know,” said Mrs. Bradley. “Did Mrs. Platt ever alter her laundry mark?”

“You’ve said it,” replied Mr. Macanallan, with a melancholy leer at Mr. Dewey. “I’ll trouble you, Dewey, for a sixpence. Thank you kindly. You’ll mind that we betted on that.”

Mr. Dewey crowed with amusement.

“He said you’d ask that! He said an intelligent lady…”

"Woman," corrected Mr. Macanallan austerely.

"Ah, woman—would be bound to ask that question. And you 'ave! Well, I never, never did! It would never have come to me, that wouldn't!"

"Go on, please, Mr. Macanallan," said Mrs. Bradley.

"Ay, well, she did that. And to save your breath, I might tell you that the number Mrs. Murdon has now was the number Mrs. Commy-Platt had two years syne, and rejected, because it was number fifty, and her laundry, so she said—and it was the truth, for all I argued the point, but against my conscience—was always being mixed up with that of another customer who had the number thirty—or vice-versa—I do not remember. So, to save the argument and keep the customer, we picked out Mrs. Commy-Platt's laundry marks, and gave her a new number which would not get confused, we hoped, with other folk's. And now, that's all I can tell you."

"Oh, no, it isn't; not quite," returned Mrs. Bradley. "What laundry mark was on all Mrs. Platt's things when she first sent things to your laundry when she moved here?"

"Why, the number she complained about, of course. And as I did not happen to have that number on my books, I let her keep it, to save trouble, although no trouble at all did it save in the end, as you have seen, for we had to alter it for her."

"And all the things sent from Mrs. Platt's house would have the same number, even if they were not her personal belongings, I suppose?"

"Every one the same; even the pocket handkerchiefs of her companion; all were marked for the house, do you see, and not for the individual."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Macanallan. And now, what about some more beer?"

• 4 •

"And now," said Mrs. Bradley, "for Comrade Burt."

"He's been asking for you," said the nurse. "We've had a job to keep him in bed, I can tell you, for, between you and me, he's as well as ever, and he hates the idea of staying here any longer."

Burt was savagely bored. He wanted to get up, he said; he did not care who was after him. He added that he could take care of himself and did not

want any old woman bleating round his heels.

"I want to know all about the diving-board," said Mrs. Bradley.

"I don't," replied Burt, heaving himself sulkily upright. "All I want to know is who laid me out in that passage. That's all I want to know."

"All in good time, child," Mrs. Bradley responded. "Oh, and if you want to leave the hospital, you can."

"When?"

"This afternoon, if you like, as soon as I have gone. You see, whoever it was that attacked you will know, I expect, that I've come here this afternoon, and will deduce that everything you know will become mine during this session of ours."

"You mean that'll let me out, you knowing everything I know?"

"Yes, I think so, child."

"Then I'm blowed if I tell you a thing."

"Now, now," said Mrs. Bradley, eyeing him sternly, "this is no time for chivalry, so speak rapidly, intelligibly, and to the point."

"Well, I'm the only chap in the Club goes in off that top board, see, in competitions, excepting Talby, but he don't do it in competitions mostly. So I reckon if anything was done to that board, it must have been meant for me or him. I'm the likeliest one as would cop out, see, by diving from off of there, but it might have been meant for Talby. Only, being as how I was the one that pulled her out of the river, I reckon it was meant all right for me."

"That's what I think, child."

"Well, I climb up, see, careless-like, not looking, and the first thing I know the board starts parting company with the stand. 'Hullo,' I thinks, and then I pulls myself together to dive in, clear of the board. And that's about all, you see."

"All that I knew before. But who could have got at that board? And what was done to it?"

"Why don't you ask the superintendent?"

"I did, child. So did the police. He doesn't know. The boards were not tested just before the gala. He says he saw no need to test them. The bath had closed for less than a month, and the boards were in perfect order on the day that the war broke out."

"I know they were. Used them myself the day before. The Saturday that would have been."

“Also, Tom Talby went in off that top board, my niece informs me, on the day before the gala, so it must have been all right then, too. By the way, where was Tom on the afternoon of the gala?”

“Search me!”

“So you can’t assist me, child?”

“No, I can’t. All is know is as I’m the only one as ever dives off the top regular, in competitions. Therefore, if it was malice aforethought, it was malice intentioned for me.”

“That seems clear enough. Now, Eddie, you’ve had plenty of time to think since you’ve been here. When you pulled that woman’s body out of the river by the island, what did you do, see or hear which would give anyone the impression that you knew more about the affair than was convenient?”

“Nothing. I fished her out and laid her on the bank and went back for ’er ’at, and that’s all.”

“Went back for what?”

“’Er ’at. Floating on the water, it was. So I went in after it and fished it out, and when I got back to where I’d laid her down—showed you the place and all, didn’t I?—well, the old girl ’ad gorn. I thought it was a bit cool of ’er to pick ’erself up and vamoose like that without so much as saying thank you. Still, I’m used to that treatment. ’Ad it all me life.” He sniffed dolefully, full of self-pity.

“Yes, but, child, how was she dressed?”

“Like how I told you before.”

“And she had a hat?”

“Ah. I fished it out, I tell you, and was going to take it to ’er when I found she’d gorn.”

“What did you do with the hat?”

“I felt a bit fed up, so I chucked it in again.”

“Oh? Did you have a look at it first to see whether it was marked with the woman’s name?”

“No, I don’t know as I did. Turned it over in me ’ands, maybe, but I never looked for no name. Do ladies put their names in their ’ats?”

“Sometimes, and sometimes not.”

“Ah. What I thought.”

“Bless you, child. Well, you can get up now. Don’t go about in the black-out if you can help it.”

“You mean as how somebody might still try to bump me off?”

“No, child, but you might be run over,” said Mrs. Bradley kindly. She herself looked sharply about her as she left the building, and, disregarding Sherlock Holmes’s maxim about taxis, signalled the first one she saw, got in with great celerity, and drove all the way to Lady Selina’s house, for which joy-ride she was mulcted of considerable sums of money by the driver, who informed her, very gently, that the bus did the journey for fivepence.

Upon this, Mrs. Bradley, cackling, added a considerable amount to the sum for which she had made herself responsible, and the taxi-driver, shaking his head over a customer who appeared to suffer from none of the idiosyncrasies of her sex, stuck up his For Hire notice, and slowly drove back to the town.

• CHAPTER 19 •

Man Under an Umbrella in the Snow.
Title of a finger-tip painting by Kao Ch'i-P'ei.

• 1 •

"And now about Mrs. Platt and the girl Fletcher," said Mrs. Bradley invitingly. She and Pat had met by appointment in Lady Selina's house on the afternoon following Pat's attendance at the Council meeting.

"I was discovered at a quarter-past eight," Pat explained, "by Councillor Mrs. Perk, who happened to be sitting opposite to where I was screwed up, with my notebook, under the U-shaped table, hidden, as I thought, by Councillor Shepherd and Councillor Miss O'Regan, both of whom are fairly big. Of course, I was chucked out, but not without a good deal of argument, because some of the Councillors don't see why the meetings shouldn't be reported, and I said that they were held in the public interest and that I thought the public were entitled to know what went on in them. However, we lost the day, and out I had to go, leaving, I think, at ten to nine. I'm really awfully sorry, but until I'm independent—that is to say, in a Fleet Street job—I have to mind what I get up to."

"And is the Fleet Street job any nearer?" Mrs. Bradley enquired.

"Well, yes, I think it is. I've managed to get quite a lot of personal publicity over all the doings here, you know. In fact, now that this place has become so fearfully exciting I'm not sure that I want to leave it. Still, I have my career to think of, even in wartime."

"Of course," Mrs. Bradley agreed. "And now about Mrs. Platt and the girl Fletcher."

"Yes, I know what you mean. But as I said when I mentioned them before, nothing was ever proved, and, really, I'd sooner you didn't ask me. I mean, it's nothing but rumour."

"I'd like to hear it."

"Would you? Well, I know you won't let me down by repeating it where it could do me any harm. It seems that the girl Fletcher acted as Mrs. Platt's companion when Mrs. Platt first came here. She was a sort of cross between a companion and a lady's-maid. She had been apprenticed to hairdressing, you see, so she was quite useful. Then she could write some of Mrs. Platt's letters, and all went well (so I heard) until Mrs. Platt began to miss things—a ring, a brooch, two pound notes, earrings, a jewelled comb, a rather decent set of handkerchiefs, some expensive perfume, and what not. Nothing was ever traced to the girl Fletcher, but Mrs. Platt got the idea that she had taken them, so she sacked her."

"Oh?"

"Yes. The parents had some idea, so the father told me, when I went to interview him about his prize vegetables that time, of appealing against defamation of character, and claiming damages, or something, but apparently they dropped it. Anyhow, Mrs. Platt must have dropped it, too, because not so much later on she used to have Fletcher up to the house to help her with all her charities and that, so, apparently, what it was had all blown over."

"Ah?" said Mrs. Bradley. "Thank you. I see. It doesn't seem, any of it, to call for murder, then?"

"Murder? Oh, good heavens, no! Whatever made you think of that?"

"Well, I have good reason to believe that Mrs. Platt knows a good deal more about one of the murders than she would like other people to know."

"I say, really? Do tell me which."

"Not for publication, mind. The case is in an extremely delicate state."

"Of course I wouldn't print anything without permission."

"Well, did you ever hear of the very bad blood…"

"Between her and Councillor Smith? I say! Did you ferret that out? Surely not! It's fearfully ancient history, though, you know. I don't really see that it could have any bearing."

"You mean…?"

"Why, when she proposed to him, of course, and he wouldn't have her. It was all the talk of the town about six years ago. I've often heard them laughing about it at my digs."

"This is most disconcerting," said Mrs. Bradley. "It makes it almost too easy."

"Well, don't go raking it up again, unless you really must. We did all we could with it in the paper at the time, although, of course, it didn't amount to a great deal, because we had to be careful of the law of libel, for one thing. We could only approach it in the gossip column, and we had to be careful even then."

"Interesting. Now I want you to find out where Mrs. Platt has gone."

"But the police are looking for her, aren't they?"

"Not officially. I think you might succeed where the inspector may fail. Will you undertake to trace her?"

"Give me the inside dope, Mrs. Bradley. Do you honestly think that Mrs. Platt has murdered three people in this town?"

"I'm not going to answer that question because I don't know whether she has or not. This much is certain. Her actions have been deeply suspicious since the death of her husband. Did you know him, by the way?"

"Oh, no. He died before she came here, you know. She was a wealthy widow when she came, and she's had one or two companions, beginning with the girl Fletcher."

"Did you ever hear anything of her husband's people?"

"No, nothing at all. I believe he was a manufacturer or something. Anyway, she seems to have heaps of money. Since she's been here she's taken a great interest in all the affairs of the town—as long as she could boss the show, of course."

"Yes. Well, I wish we could find her. I want to get at her before the police can question her."

"Oh, dear! That sounds as though you and Inspector Stallard don't get on together as well as I thought you did."

"Does it?" said Mrs. Bradley. "Two of a trade, you know!"

They parted amicably, Mrs. Bradley ringing the bell for the maid to show Pat out.

The postman, his arrival coinciding with Pat's departure, brought Mrs. Bradley a letter from her niece. The gist of it was that Sally was coming home; that she supposed Aunt Adela had investigated the note which had been left for Pat at the Report Centre on the night that Lillie Fletcher was murdered; that Sally must emphasise the fact that she was bored stiff; that she thought it was too bad that Aunt Adela should be in Willington having all the fun whilst Sally was in exile being (the underlining was almost pathetic) bored stiff.

Mrs. Bradley announced over the tea-cups the imminence of Sally's return. Lady Selina seemed pleased.

"She can go to the Social Evening for me," she said. "Then I need not find a reserve to take my afternoon duty."

"Your afternoon duty, Selina?"

"Yes. I had promised to act as reserve telephonist if ever they found themselves short-handed at the Report Centre, and Mr. Manley sent up yesterday to know whether I could report for duty at two o'clock on Friday. Eight hours is a long time, but Sally can do the Social Evening for me instead. I am anxious to know what goes on in that Report Centre."

"You intend to find out how and why Miss Fletcher was murdered, do you mean?"

"No, of course not. Don't be small-minded, Adela. I want to know what they do there, and how they get on, that's all."

"Ah, yes. I suppose you wouldn't allow me to undertake it for you? I promise I would give you a faithful report of all that happened. Then you could go to the Social Evening yourself."

"Well, that's good of you, Adela. Would you really go?"

"I am most anxious to go," said Mrs. Bradley truthfully.

• 2 •

There was no moon and it was cold. Mrs. Bradley caught the bus with less than half a minute to spare, having run the last hundred yards when she thought it might be coming. Luckily, it was a regular stopping-place, otherwise she would not have got on, for the night was black. There were no stars to be seen, for the sky was heavy with cloud.

Mrs. Bradley had mentioned to no one her intention of spending a night, as well as Lady Selina's afternoon and evening, at the Report Centre. Lady Selina's shift was a comparatively easy one, although the eight hours from two o'clock until ten passed slowly. There was not that need to combat sleep, however, which made the night shift so intolerable to many of the A.R.P. workers; Mrs. Bradley had read, knitted, gossiped, accepted tea and cakes from the canteen in the Town Hall, and had, between whiles, made out a detailed report for Lady Selina.

Before she left she had had a private word with the supervisor, who had directed her to the Town Hall official who arranged the rota of volunteers and permanent staff for the Report Centre.

In consequence of a conversation which Mrs. Bradley had had with this official, a middle-aged, rather muddle-headed man named Bayley, she was boarding the bus three evenings later, and arrived in Willington to take the place of one of the permanent staff who had caught an unseasonable dose of influenza.

If she had not been down the narrow passage twice previously in daylight, the first time with Pat and Sally to inspect the scene of the third Willington murder, and the second time as Lady Selina's substitute, she would have had considerable difficulty in finding the entrance. Once between the two buildings which bounded it, however, she found that a white line drawn down the middle of the asphalt provided a handy guide to two steps. These shone frostily in the light of her small torch, and, mounting them, she found herself before a door on a formidable latch which was shifted for her from inside by a youth of twenty, who said good evening rather uncertainly and left her to find her way in.

She walked through an archway into a brilliantly lighted room in which dart-boards challenged the supremacy of large-scale maps of the district, and tremendous notices forbidding smoking (disregarded, Mrs. Bradley noticed, by two of the gentlemen present) competed with two clocks, one electrically controlled and the other of the ordinary older-fashioned, wind-up type. The most impressive feature, however, was a raid-warning dial, on which, Mrs. Bradley confidently believed, a "yellow" was very frequently shown.

There were several tables, large and small, in the room. One supported three telephones, another two packs of cards, a third the clocking-in book, and others held maps, plans, registers of various kinds, graphs, flimsy sheets of printed matter (forms of some kind, some in red, and others in black print), a half-knitted sock, ash-trays, pennies, and a wireless-receiving set.

Mrs. Bradley, guided thereto by a young gentleman of guileless aspect and charming manners, signed her name on the book, and passed on into the room assigned to the telephonists.

She hung up her hat, coat, and gas-mask on pegs (of which there was a row along one wall) and seated herself on one of the plush-covered chairs.

She looked round the long narrow room, observed the line of demarcation between the permanent and the volunteer staff, and set about making the acquaintance of the former.

She was lucky enough—it would be proper to say that she had worked out her luck in this respect with the muddle-headed Mr. Bayley at the Town Hall—to find no fewer than three of the same girls on duty as had been there on the night of the murder. The volunteer staff was entirely different, although two teachers had heard the lurid story from their colleagues and were a little over-eager with suggestions and criticism.

By ten minutes past ten the new shift had settled down. Mrs. Bradley learned nothing fresh about the murder of Miss Fletcher, although rumour, it seemed, had been busy.

"I still think the poison part might have been attempted suicide," said a girl in trousers. "Fletcher was awfully worried about her boy friend, you know."

"The young man in the Auxiliary Fire Service?"

"Yes. He'd been seen taking out a girl called Gertie Peascomb, an awfully pretty girl. You know, not a lot of her, but ever so sweet. Just the sort boys like. That had been going on for over a month, and we believe Fletcher knew, although she never let on."

"Really?" said Mrs. Bradley.

"Or else," said the thin girl, "Coffin himself did it. The police had a go at him, you know, but, of course, he wouldn't confess."

"I thought he had an alibi," said one of the teachers mildly. "I thought the other men said he'd been with them all the time."

"Oh, they did! But what's the use of that? It's awfully suspicious to have an alibi," said one of the permanent staff who had not been present on the former occasion. "It's the first thing the police suspect."

"Only in detective stories," said the teacher.

At eleven o'clock the first cup of tea came round. Mrs. Bradley moved to where she imagined Sally might have been sitting. For the second cup of tea she sat in what had been Pat's place, and then in the place which had been occupied by the girl permanently in charge of the police and District Centre telephones. These telephones were on the end table, and the person in charge of them was most likely to be the first to handle any cups which were passed in through the hatchway.

At four o'clock in the morning she mentioned the note to which Sally had referred in her letter. Two of the girls remembered it because (as one of them explained) it seemed queer for a volunteer to have her correspondence sent to the Report Centre. The supervisor sent it in, she thought.

Mrs. Bradley walked into the next room. The explanation was simple. Miss Mort's landlady had delivered the note by hand. It had been put through the letter-box at Pat's lodgings, and her landlady had believed that it might be important. She had supposed that the editor of the *Willington Record* had sent it.

Mrs. Bradley emerged, at six o'clock, shaking her head. She had learned one thing only from her experiment, and had confirmed her first opinion that it would have been possible, although not easy, for any one of eight people present, consisting of Pat, Sally, four teachers and two of the six permanent staff who had been at the Centre on the night of the murder, to have dropped poison into the coffee, but it was next to impossible to make certain that the poisoned coffee would reach the person for whom it was intended. This intrigued Mrs. Bradley more than anything she had discovered up to that stage in the investigation, except for one point on which she thought too little stress had been laid.

The police had so exhaustively dealt with the question of the three cocktails which Miss Fletcher had drunk before she arrived at the Report Centre that Mrs. Bradley felt that there was little to be gained from going over that part of the ground again, but the interesting and significant fact that, although arsenic had been found to be present in the vomit, no arsenic at all had been traced during the autopsy, had not, she felt, received the consideration which was its obvious due.

"Well?" said the inspector, who had known that the experiment was to be carried out.

"I don't say that the wrong girl received the poison, if poison there was, because, after all, she was knocked on the head and killed," said Mrs. Bradley. "But I do say that fate, not the murderer, must have selected the victim, if any of that coffee was poisoned."

"How do you mean?" asked Stallard. Mrs. Bradley told him.

"You really don't think that the poisoned coffee could have been passed to one particular person?"

"Not unless somebody made a point of it, and we have Sally's clear statement, supported by Pat and the girl on the police and headquarters

telephones, that no such fuss was made. The cups were passed round, and it seems to have been purely a matter of chance who got each particular cup."

"That's nasty," said the inspector.

"On the contrary, it brings back forcibly to our minds the fact that no arsenic was discoverable in Lillie Fletcher's body," said Mrs. Bradley.

"You mean, it proves your theory?"

"Heavens, no, child! I have no theory, in the sense that you mean. I deal in facts, like all the good detectives, and as every psychologist should. And your honour does not mean the cherry brandy, ma'am," she added with a hideous cackle.

The inspector looked at her reproachfully.

"What have you been up to?" he demanded. "There's something more in this than you've been telling me."

"All that I've been up to," replied Mrs. Bradley, with a grin, "is to get somebody more capable than the police to find Mrs. Commy-Platt, who, you may remember, has left Willington…"

"For her health. Yes, I know. Pat. She told me. How can Pat trace her, when we haven't a thing to go on? I could dig her out easily enough, of course, if I used all our…"

"Ponderous machinery," said Mrs. Bradley, in return for the double meaning attaching to Mrs. Platt's health.

It was two days later that Pat reported that Mrs. Platt had gone to Lowestoft.

"Funny place to evacuate herself to, surely?" said Stallard, when he heard it.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Pat. "School-children have been sent there, haven't they? Are you going down there to see her, or are you going to hike her up here to see you?"

"I haven't decided," the inspector replied mendaciously.

"O.K., George Washington," the reporter replied. "Give me something about it when you can."

"I shall leave Mrs. Platt to simmer," Stallard observed, when Pat had gone. "Now we know where she is I shall have her checked up on. I suppose Pat's right, by the way?"

"I have little doubt of it," Mrs. Bradley responded. "She has a habit of being right."

"I wonder how she got on to Mrs. P.?" said Stallard thoughtfully.

Mrs. Bradley put this query to the young reporter when next she met her. This happened to be at the inspection of A.R.P. volunteers by Sir Gonnington "Stormalong" Phipps, a notable from the borough of Winborough—in fact its Mayor—knighted on the occasion of the Royal opening of Winborough's new by-pass road.

"Lot of twaddle, but I suppose I must report him fairly fully," Pat observed, edging up to Mrs. Bradley, who had been given a prominent position beside her son Ferdinand in a kind of grandstand from which (in Ferdinand's view, unnecessarily) a good view of the whole of the A.R.P. personnel and its inspection could be obtained.

Mrs. Bradley grinned, and Pat moved away to the Press seats, which were in front of those occupied by Mrs. Bradley and her son.

"How's it all going, Mother?" Ferdinand enquired, when the inspection had run about half of its course and the knight was shaking hands with the fire-fighting units.

"Did poor Coffin remind you of the murders?" his mother enquired, as the hand-shaking reached the young man to whom she referred.

"I suppose so, yes."

"I don't think it's going particularly well," Mrs. Bradley replied. "As a matter of fact, we are hoping great things from the next interview we have with Mrs. Platt."

"Why?"

"She seems to have behaved rather badly towards her husband's sister, the unfortunate woman whose body was found in the A.R.P. tank near the canal."

"Oh, yes? I don't know Mrs. Platt."

"You have missed an interesting experience."

"And you are going to get her to tell you something important?"

"Yes, we hope so. I don't see how we should have managed it, though, if it had not been for that girl reporter in front of us—the one in the dark blue beret."

Pat lifted her head, and then went on with her shorthand.

"Good gracious, Mother! I hope I'm not babbling questions and queering the pitch," said Ferdinand. "I think she can hear us. Does it matter very much?"

"It doesn't matter at all, child, fortunately. The local paper is almost entirely in our confidence."

“But, if she can hear, so can others.”

“True. I think we are expected to applaud the successful conclusion of the hand-shaking.”

She leaned forward and managed to attract the reporter’s attention.

“The inspector is anxious to know how you found Mrs. Platt,” she remarked.

“Quite blooming,” Pat responded, with a smile. “No, I know what you mean. Well, I had a fair amount of luck. I went to the Post Office—although I knew it was about the first thing the inspector would have thought of—and asked whether Mrs. Platt had left an address so that her letters could be forwarded. The postmaster said that…”

“Mrs. Platt had left no address,” Mrs. Bradley interpolated, “but that she sometimes received communications from…”

“A friend at Lowestoft. Yes. So I went to Lowestoft and inspected all the bath-chair occupants…”

“Oh, I thought that was Bournemouth.”

“…until I found Mrs. Platt. She did not see me, but I followed her home and discovered that she is staying near Sparrows’ Nest.”

“Under her own name?”

“No. Under the name of Smith. Funny, rather, isn’t it?”

“Not particularly,” Mrs. Bradley answered. “Have you told the inspector?”

“No. I thought perhaps I’d better tell you first.”

“That was most considerate. All right. I’ll let him know, if you’ll give me the exact address.”

Pat wrote it on a leaf of her reporter’s notebook, and then said that she had to hurry off, as she had an appointment.

“For a real job,” she announced, as she reached the door. “The sort of thing I’ve been hoping for, I think.”

“A London newspaper?” Mrs. Bradley enquired. “I suppose your handling of the news about these murders here has assisted your application.”

“I expect so. I’ve no other influence, anyway,” the girl answered with a hard little laugh. “Good-bye.”

• CHAPTER 20 •

Trotting Race.
Title for a painting by Max Slevogt.

• 1 •

"I wish," said Mrs. Bradley, "that you would also arrest Patricia Mort."

"Oh, lor! Aunt Adela!" responded Stallard. "I can't go about arresting everybody."

"That would only make two, dear child."

"Yes, but you wanted me to arrest Burt, as well."

"Burt is accounted for now. Pat, I regret to say, is not."

"Why, what danger could Pat be in?"

"Well, she gets about and pokes her nose into things, and finds out secrets, I think."

"Why doesn't she report them to us, then?"

"She has her career to think of."

"Yes, but, still, it's her duty to help the police. I'll have a talk to her about it."

"Do. And if she proves to be in the slightest degree indiscreet, arrest her without delay or compunction, child. And if anything else happens, don't say I didn't warn you."

When she had parted from him she went to the Public Baths and asked for Tom Talby's address. It was probable, she thought, that the superintendent would know it.

The box-office attendants seemed a little shy of sending for the superintendent to answer Mrs. Bradley's questions, but eventually were persuaded, and the boy who went between the basket at the end of the bath, into which the soiled towels were dropped, and the Baths Laundry, which was again functioning, was pressed into service to go and find him.

“Mr. Talby?” said the superintendent. “Yes. He lives in Cheepers Road. Number eleven, I think. Past the Town Hall, first turning on the right, past the pond, and up the hill. It isn’t far from here.”

“Thank you. And have you discovered yet why the top board fell with Mr. Burt on it?”

“Yes. It was easy enough to locate the trouble, and don’t I wish I could satisfy myself who did it! You see, that’s a movable board. Matter of four nuts and bolts. Somebody had them all out seemingly with the intention of taking the board right down to give a better view from that end of the gallery—comes across your eyes, you see, if you get right up the far corner, and we move it away sometimes if we think it won’t be wanted for the gala, and I often have it down when I’ve got some of those daring monkeys of school-kids in the place and nobody much to give an eye to them. My assistant’s a good boy, and a very nice swimmer, but lacks firmness. So, as it’s shifted so often, it’s what you might call easy shifted.”

“I see,” said Mrs. Bradley.

“Well, whoever began the job—and I’ve moved heaven and earth to try and find out who it was!—never finished, but left the board balanced on the supports without being bolted in. Once you might manage to dive from it without a thing happening, but in the takeoff you’d displace it. See what I mean? And then a second dive, which is what Burt took, would finish it off, and down you’d come along of it, and lucky if you managed to do what he did—get as far forward as the water.”

“There was a chance, then, he might have been killed?”

“More likely very badly injured, but, of course, he might have been killed.”

“Thank you very much. Now, can you tell me the last time that board was looked at, to your certain knowledge, before the gala commenced?”

“Yes, I can that. Funnily enough young Tom Talby didn’t seem too satisfied with it, and mentioned it to me that he’d been off it—a practice dive—when he left the Baths the day before the gala. So I had a look at it myself, and I swear it was all right then.”

“And that was…?”

“Oh, about four o’clock, I suppose.”

“On the day before the gala?”

“Yes, that’s it. I know it was just before tea, or something around that time.”

"And who, in your opinion, might have tampered with it afterwards?"

"Upon my Sam, I don't know. My boys all deny it, of course, and, seeing how nearly it turned out a nasty accident for Burt, I can't really say I blame them. Whoever did it didn't mean any harm, but I wish they'd wait to get orders. I suppose they thought that as we had it down for the Boy Scouts' gala in August, it had to come down again. The trouble is that the staff here is always changing. The pay is poor, you see, and the hours are pretty long, and the conditions are mostly unhealthy, so the consequence is that I can't really keep a staff—except the pay-office women—they go on and on—from one summer's end to another. I nearly always have at least a couple of new attendants every winter. The summer ones get sick of it and leave."

"I see. Thank you for explaining it all to me. And now—you won't like this question, but—is there any possibility that the board could have been loosened mischievously, and not by a member of your staff at all?"

The Baths superintendent paused before making his reply.

"There's only this," he said. "These Baths—if you'd like to walk with me I'll show you—back out on to the clinic."

They walked out of the building by the front doors and went past the Baths superintendent's house, which had a small front garden bounded by a wooden fence. Next came some iron railings painted green, and these enclosed a small park or public garden with a gravel path leading alongside the Baths superintendent's garden palings to a red-brick building which had been added to the original structure of the Baths.

"This is the clinic—the school clinic—and the Welfare," the Baths superintendent explained, "and it joins on to the Baths, as you can see. Now, through here"—he led the way into a broad brick tunnel to double doors made of wood—"is the big bath itself. Go through"—he produced a key and unlocked the door—"and we come to the lavatories."

This also was obvious, for the three small doors were wide open.

"Now here's what I think must have happened, if your idea is the right one—and the more I think of it, the more I reckon you're hot on the cause of the trouble. When these double doors are open—which they often are, to air the place a bit—we shut the entrance with this iron grille."

He inserted an iron rod at the side of the doorway, and pulled across the opening the same kind of grille as is often used for the inner door of a lift.

“There, you see! Nobody can get in—or shouldn’t be able to!—and the place can get a bit more air with no more draught to the bathers, unless they come through that further opening there. Go through and have a look.”

Mrs. Bradley walked forward to a very short, narrow passage between two dressing boxes, and came to the edge of the bath. She was less than a dozen feet from the diving stands. Regardless of the bathers, who were all men, for the women’s time that day was earlier, and the Town Council allowed mixed bathing only twice a week, for some reason best known to Mrs. Commy-Platt and Councillor Grant, who were at one in suspecting the townspeople of low ideals and crude, insatiable desires, she walked to the stands and began to climb to the top. The top board from which Mr. Burt had so cleverly fallen was no longer in place, but she was able to get an idea of the way that the boards were clamped to the uprights and to appreciate how little time need be taken by anybody handy with a spanner or a wrench to make a board unsafe for people to use.

“You see,” said the Baths superintendent when she returned to earth, “how easily it could be done. By the way, we won’t stay in here long, if you don’t mind, as I’m not allowed to have ladies in here during gentlemen’s hours, if you’ll excuse me.”

They popped back into the apparently permissible environs of the lavatories, and the superintendent then pushed back the iron grille with the short iron rod and then invited Mrs. Bradley to close the opening again.

She did so, but the superintendent then pulled the grille back with his hand to make an aperture about eighteen inches wide. He squeezed his body past this, and invited her to follow. Her small wiry frame slipped as easily through the opening as a cat.

“What have I left undone?” she asked, as they both went back again.

“What my assistant did, I reckon, although he’ll deny it,” the Baths superintendent answered. “You’ve got to hear it click. Listen.”

He clicked the latch into place, and then demonstrated that the grille could no longer be withdrawn without the insertion of the rod.

“That’s how it was done, for a pound!” he said. “But no good bothering now. We’d never find out who did it. Boys, most likely. You’d be surprised, since the schools can only have the children half-time with the evacuees, what they get up to.”

Mrs. Bradley said sympathetically but untruthfully that she supposed she would be surprised, and then, as they walked back to the front entrance

of the Baths to the superintendent's little lair by the shallow end of the bath, she enquired whether the superintendent could tell at what time the fixing of the board had been tampered with.

"Certainly, within half an hour, if that's any good to you," he answered.

Mrs. Bradley replied that it would be wonderful.

"Between five and half-past on the evening before the gala, or between eight and half-past on the morning of the gala, or—Oh, lor, that's torn it! Of course it could have been done at any time between twelve midday, when we closed the bath to the public, up to when the gala started, pretty nearly."

"Not so good," thought Mrs. Bradley. Aloud she thanked the superintendent for his help, and went back to Lady Selina's house.

"So that's how it was done," said Sally, who was there to greet her aunt.

"Yes. How are the potatoes?" Mrs. Bradley enquired.

"I don't know, until next year. It's all fun, though. I'm only home for a few days, you know. Aunt Adela, how are things going?"

"Things, child?"

"Yes. The murders and what not. Have you found out any more?"

"Well, yes, I think perhaps we have."

She described Mr. Burt's part in the affair, and detailed the evidence given by the laundry proprietor.

"So it really looks like Mrs. Platt," said Sally. "But somehow, I can't believe it. I'm sure she hasn't the courage. Besides, she couldn't possibly have had anything to do with the death of that poor girl Fletcher."

"She could have poisoned Councillor Smith, though."

"Funny. That's what Pat suggested—that the death of Lillie Fletcher had nothing at all to do with the other two deaths. Don't you think there's something in that?"

"Possibly, child. But not, I think, a great deal."

"Why not?"

"As I see it, child, the two murders to be linked together are not those of Councillor Smith and Miss Platt, but those of Miss Platt and Lillie Fletcher."

"Oh—the two women!"

"An enlightening way of putting it, child."

"Then Councillor Smith…"

"Was murdered to make a further stir in the town."

"I don't see how you deduce it."

"Don't you? At Councillor Smith's party three well-known people drank stout. At the Report Centre a good many comparatively unimportant people drank coffee."

"Yes? Well?"

"I'm afraid that's all, child, for the present."

"You frighten me, Aunt Adela."

"Yes. I have frightened you from the beginning, Sally. You do well to allow yourself to be frightened, too."

"Are you safe, Aunt Adela?"

"No."

"You will be careful, won't you?"

"Yes."

"Did I tell you that Pat Mort is trying to get sent to Finland? She's had an invitation from the London paper she's managed to get herself on to, to go and wait there for events."

"Has she? Does the editor think that interesting events are going to take place in Finland?"

"He thinks they might. He's got his eye on Russia. Pat's fearfully keen to go. But won't she be wanted at the trial, if you catch the murderers?"

"Why do you ask me that, child?"

"Because of the Report Centre business."

"She wouldn't be wanted for that any more than for the other murders, child."

"Oh, I see. You really intend to prove all three?"

"I don't know yet. It depends entirely, of course, upon the evidence."

"Is this murderer more than usually elusive, Aunt Adela?" asked Sally, gazing suspiciously upon her relative.

"I don't know, child. After all, it is the main business of murderers to avoid detection and capture."

"I suppose the murderer of the two women is not a homicidal maniac?"

"Good gracious, no! That murderer is dreadfully sane, within the meaning of that word as applied by Act of Parliament."

“You mean that you’d consider it insane to murder two women for no reason, but that the law wouldn’t?”

“I did not say the murderer had no reason. I know the reason. But establishing a motive is not sufficient evidence to prove guilt, otherwise a good many people would be hanged.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Oh, yes, you do. And you must now forget all about this conversation.”

“Do you think you can get enough evidence to convict the murderers, Aunt Adela?”

“We are talking in circles, child?”

“I rather hope you can’t, Aunt Adela,” said Sally, who seemed desirous of prolonging the conversation. “I don’t like to think of people being hanged, whatever they’ve done. What made you suspect, in the first place?”

“All sort of things. First a little, unimportant statement which gave me a false clue and then a real one; then the extraordinary attitude of Mrs. Commy-Platt; then the difficulty of attributing any motive to any one criminal, because of the lack of association between one victim and another; then the evidence of the fishmonger, then lots more things, the significance of which depended on whether I had hit upon the identity of the criminals. Then, of course, there were the attempts on Eddie Burt, which persuaded me that in one respect at least I was right.”

“Oh, dear! I wish you’d never come here! Nobody else would have guessed!”

“But you guessed, Sally, right at the beginning!”

“Yes, but I guessed Lillie Fletcher! You see, there was always that note. I oughtn’t to suspect Pat just because of that, but, you see, she showed it to me. I’ve been wondering for ages what I ought to do about it.”

“Do nothing about it, child. I can guess what was in that note. What did Pat do with it after she had read it?”

“Just tore it up.”

“At what time did she read it?”

“Not until the next day. She had shoved it into her pocket because we were supposed to be busy practising.”

“And the note was to ask her to meet an unnamed person at the Grand cinema, when she would be given some information for the gossip column

of her paper."

"Yes, that's exactly what it was. She said she'd had assignments like that before, and had kept them, although she didn't much like it."

• 2 •

"I think," said Mrs. Bradley to the inspector, "that if we can nail down one of those half-hours when the bath was empty, we may get a confession, you know."

"I don't care much for confessions. They don't do the police any good. A confession at the gallows' foot for spiritual reasons is the best. That doesn't concern the police, but only the prison chaplain."

"True, child."

"Can't we get enough evidence without having to get a confession?"

"Possibly. And possibly not."

"Blow. All right, then. I'll check up on the Baths and see how we go from there. It ought to be easy enough. What are you going to do now? I feel we've had all the help we can reasonably expect."

"Meaning that you'd be glad if I took myself off."

"Well, you are a responsibility now that you know so much."

"It's as safe to know much as to know very, very little in this case, child. I am in no more danger now—Oh, I forgot. Yes, I am. All right. You carry on, and I'll go back to Wandles Parva. Call me again if you want me. By the way, you'll get no more assistance from Patricia Mort. Her London editor is sending her to Finland."

"I didn't know she'd got a London job?"

"It's new, I gather. The vacancy existed for a woman correspondent, and Pat snapped it up on the strength of her newspaper work in connection with the murders here in Willington."

"Really? I must congratulate her. She must have worked pretty hard, on the whole, you know, and I shouldn't wonder if she hasn't run some risks."

"I think she has, but to her they would appear to be worth while."

"I always thought it a shame she didn't get a proper university training. The girl's got brains. Sally will miss her, won't she?"

"Yes, poor Sally. She's very much cast down. They have been quite friendly for some time. By the way! You must go searching for the clothes that were taken off Miss Platt."

"Thanks, I will. But don't you think they've been burnt or buried before this?"

"I doubt it. It takes a big fire to burn clothes, and, burning cloth is apt to smell pretty strongly. Buried? Likelier, perhaps, but not much. The safest thing by far, it seems to me, would have been to hang them up in a wardrobe or put them away in a drawer, and take no more notice of them; in fact, try to forget, oneself, that they were there."

"But people ferret among other people's things."

"You know the people of Willington better than I do, of course."

"Oh well, I'll do my best, but it's like the needle in the haystack, you know."

"And look for a brown beret which would not fit its present owner."

"In the same place as the clothes?"

"Yes, in the same place, child. And now for Mr. Talby. I hope I shall find him at home."

"Tom Talby? What on earth has he got to do with it?"

"Very little, I hope, but…he wasn't present at the gala."

"Ah, but I know about that."

"You do?"

"Yes. It was one of those silly accidents which do happen occasionally. He got himself locked in."

"Where?"

"A council room cupboard in the Town Hall."

"But how on earth did that happen?"

"He doesn't know."

"How did you find out about it?"

"Well, he came and apologised for letting the team down. You remember that there was a team race on the programme? We didn't swim it, of course, because that air raid alarm broke up the meeting for us. Tom didn't realise that, but I told him when he came to make his apologies, and it was then that I heard about the cupboard. Oh well, I wouldn't put it past Eddie Burt to make sure of winning the diving championship."

"I think I'd like to see Tom, all the same. And, although I share your opinion of Mr. Burt, isn't Tom the only other person in the Swimming Club

who might have dived in off that top board? And that was not a competition dive."

"You're right, of course. I never thought of that. Somebody feeling tender-hearted about him, do you think? Didn't want the board to come to bits under Tom?"

"I think the person who was intended to fall from that board did fall from it."

"Yes, no doubt you're right. Well, good luck and look out for yourself. I don't care much for this business of tampering with diving boards and hitting people in the stomach during an air raid scare."

"There are always hymn books, but they are not always in a handy room," said Mrs. Bradley reminiscently. As the inspector did not follow this reference, he did not remark upon it, but, when she had gone, he went to the window and watched her all down the street.

• CHAPTER 21 •

A Siren of the Eighth Sphere.
Design by Bernardo Buontalenti for a sixteenth-century masque.

• 1 •

"Oh, that?" said Tom Talby. "Well, it must have been meant as a silly practical joke, although I must say it seemed more like a dirty trick to me.

"I had a letter—delivered by hand—just shoved through the letter-box—asking me to attend a conference at the Town Hall about the gala, and hinting that there was some hitch or other. It didn't say what was wrong, but, of course, I went.

"Well, I don't know whether you know the Town Hall inside at all? Anyhow, the note, which was typewritten and not signed, said that the meeting was to be in the Talbot Room, which is at the top of the Grand Staircase. On the landing outside there is a cupboard, and there was a notice on the door of this cupboard, which said: Bath Committee (Gala Arrangements) Meeting, please take one.

"I couldn't see anything to take, so I opened the cupboard door, and at the same moment someone shoved me inside and locked the door.

"I yelled and hammered but I couldn't make anybody hear. I was in there for about—well, I don't know how long—but I heard the air raid warning, and was in a pretty sweat, I can tell you, boxed up there, and almost underneath a glass roof.

"Anyway, by the time the All Clear went, I found I was free. I was hammering away at the panels when the door gave, and out I stumbled. I saw somebody quickly turn the corner, and I was after him like a shot, but you know what the Town Hall is—a positive rabbit warren. I heard footsteps ahead of me, as I thought, and tore along to catch up, but it was only Price, of the Council Treasurer's department. He looked slightly

surprised to see me come bounding along, and, of course, it would be absurd to suspect him of locking me in a cupboard. He'd have no conceivable reason."

"Who would have had a reason, in your opinion, Mr. Talby?"

"I can't say at all. Not one of our chaps, I imagine, and yet who else would have thought of such a thing?"

"I couldn't say."

"No. Well, I've thought about it, but I can't get anywhere."

"Somebody wanted to make quite sure that you did not dive off that very unsafe top board, one might almost imagine."

"Oh, but the board was an accident. Timmy thinks his assistant did it, and went away, forgetting he'd left it like that. The funny thing is that Pat Mort had a hunch there was something wrong with that board. You know, the reporter girl. She seemed very much concerned about the board when she met me at the Baths to get her programme annotated. But the board was all right then, because I went off it, myself, to make sure."

"Yet it nearly killed Eddie Burt, Mr. Talby, did it not?"

"Look here, you're not suggesting that I went up there and tampered with the board?"

"Such a thought would never have entered my head," said Mrs. Bradley truthfully, "but, of course, now you've suggested it…! After all, you may have had your own reasons for not wishing Eddie to win the diving competition."

Tom Talby grinned, and Mrs. Bradley went back to the Town Hall to see Mr. Price, of the Council Treasurer's department. He was behind a kind of Post Office grille, and fortunately there were no ratepayers in the office so that Mrs. Bradley was able to engage him freely in conversation. This she did, regardless of the fact that he was busy with ledgers.

"See anyone else on the…Oh, you mean the day Tom Talby caught me up on his way down the staircase? Ah, I place the occasion. I saw nobody but the usual people."

"And those were, Mr. Price?"

"Good gracious, I hope it's not important. I couldn't possibly remember. But, anyway, nobody at all remarkable, I'll swear to that. Just people on our staff, and a few odd A.R.P. personnel, and so forth."

“Child,” said Mrs. Bradley, “to whom have you explained that you were renewing the search for Miss Platt’s clothes and hat?”

“Nobody. Of course, to nobody.”

“Strange,” said Mrs. Bradley. “They’ve turned up in what we might call peculiar circumstances.”

“What? Where?”

“On Doctor Lecky’s doorstep, dear child. The maid found them when she took in the milk.”

“But that means…good heavens! I’ve arrested the wrong man, then! Who on earth put them there?”

“Nobody,” replied Mrs. Bradley, with an evil grin. “Of course, nobody.”

Then she turned on him, every trace of amusement gone.

“Think, think!” she said. “And, whilst you’re thinking, go and get hold of Sally.”

“Sally!” said the inspector. “Of course it was! Although how the devil you knew…!”

Mrs. Bradley pushed him towards the door, and followed him into his car.

“Drive fast,” she said.

“She may not be at the house,” said Stallard manoeuvring out of the gates respectfully, for they had not been designed to take a car. Once in the road, however, he increased speed, and in a time which satisfied even an anxious aunt the car covered the distance between the town and Lady Selina’s.

“Where’s Sally?” Mrs. Bradley asked the maid who opened the door.

“Miss Sally is in her room, madam.”

“Has she had any visitors, to-day?”

“Not that I know of, madam, except the young lady with her now, a Miss Montgomery, madam.”

“Y.W.C.A.,” said the inspector. “Wily as a dove, as somebody says somewhere.”

They went upstairs, and Mrs. Bradley knocked at Sally’s door. The visitor was “just going,” it appeared.

“Just one moment, Miss Montgomery,” said Mrs. Bradley. “Have you had anything to eat or drink since you’ve been here!”

"She wouldn't, Auntie," said Sally, who was looking particularly lively and pretty.

"Good for her," said Mrs. Bradley. "What are you collecting for, Miss Montgomery?"

"Our new hostel and club rooms. Oh! Thank you very much!"

When she had gone, Sally, amused but rather perturbed, exclaimed:

"Well, really, Aunt Adela! Chasing away my visitors like that! What on earth's the matter?"

"This," said Mrs. Bradley. "I want you to tell me now, at once, without holding anything back, who it is that you suspected of the murders when I first came here to Willington, and who, if anybody, you suspect now."

"Aunt Adela!"

"Come on, Sally," said Stallard. "It's important."

"I didn't suspect anyone. What makes you think I did?"

"Now, then! None of this 'schoolgirl complexion' stuff," said Stallard sternly. "Come across with everything you know. And remember that we're not at the end of the business. And, look here, young lady, why did you want to go and blow the gaff about those clothes the murderer took off that poor woman? I thought you'd respect my confidence, or I wouldn't have given it to you."

"You shouldn't have given it to her. You're the prize babbler. She comes a poorish second," said Mrs. Bradley.

"Whom did you tell, you blinking little human budgerigar?" said Stallard, disregarding Mrs. Bradley's rebuke.

"Only Pat, and she seemed to know already. I thought you'd told her yourself, she seemed to know so much about it."

"You told Pat! You let Pat bluff you into telling her the one thing you ought not to have told anybody?" Stallard's voice reached an almost adolescent squeal of indignation and self-blame. "Don't you know, you wretched booby, that to tell a reporter anything is to tell the world? I wonder you hadn't more sense! But there! As your aunt says, it's all my fault. Well, between us, young woman, I think we've mucked my case."

"Oh, Ronald, no!"

"Yes, we have. These clothes were to have been our biggest clue. Don't you see that once we'd found them we could have given somebody the deuce of a lot of explaining to do? And in explanations made to the

police, a whole lot of things come out that the explainers don't always intend."

"Well, you shouldn't have told me," said Sally. "Aunt Adela, why did you want to know whether Miss Montgomery had had anything to eat or drink here? You weren't thinking…? Surely you weren't thinking of poison?"

"I am responsible for you to your mother. Her own inclination is to send you away again, you know."

"I think I'll go to Grandma's. It's a nice long way from here. I wish you'd come with me, Aunt Adela."

"I should like to, child, but it's impossible. You had better go with Ronald."

"Here!" said Stallard. "I don't know…"

"It's in Scotland. You're the only person I know who can get enough petrol," said Mrs. Bradley rapidly. "And it certainly isn't safe for Sally to go by train. You've made this mess, between you, and you must deal with the consequences. Get a move on, and don't let Sally out of your sight until you get at least to Stamford. Good-bye. Sally will direct you after you get to Ballater."

"Ballater!" moaned the inspector. "Well, she'll have to wait at the police station whilst I make my arrangements, and she'll have to wait at my digs, and…damn it, it's not respectable."

"No, but it's safe," said Mrs. Bradley, giving him a dig in the ribs. "And I'll make it right with the chief constable," she added, with a cackle.

• 3 •

The journey by rail to Lowestoft was inexpressibly tedious to Pat. She and Mrs. Bradley sat on opposite sides of a first-class compartment, Mrs. Bradley knitting, and appearing to find nothing boring or monotonous either in the scenery or her occupation, the girl restless and unable to enjoy or even, apparently, to tolerate the journey.

A taxi took them to the house they sought—an unpretentious private hotel about a quarter of a mile from the front—and while they were in the cab Pat enquired:

"Why did you want me to come? I gave you the address."

“I want you to hear what Mrs. Platt has to say for herself. I need a witness to the conversation.”

“There’s Isabella.”

“True.”

“That is, of course, if she’s come with Mrs. Platt,” Pat added, reasonably.

“She has, child.”

“How do you know?”

“How much do you think she knows about Mrs. Platt, and especially her treatment of Miss Platt?”

“Oh, she’s a nasty, poke-nose old thing. I expect she’s found out most of it. As a matter of fact, I’ve had a fair amount of information from her.”

“But she didn’t know of Miss Platt’s existence, did she?”

“Not before she came to live with Mrs. Platt. At least, I shouldn’t think so.”

“You know, I never made any enquiries at the telephone exchange, at which you told me—do you remember?—poor Lillie Fletcher used to be employed.”

“I don’t suppose it would make much difference. I just thought it might give one more line to go on.”

“One more?” said Mrs. Bradley. “I can’t see that, in the case of Lillie Fletcher, there are any lines to go on at all, except to suspect that wretched boy Coffin, her fiancé. That has been the chief difficulty there. We are as far as ever from knowing why anyone else should have wished to kill that girl.”

“I agree that her boy friend could tell you. Unless, of course, the wrong person was killed at the Report Centre. You don’t think that somebody else should have been the victim, do you?”

“That is an interesting suggestion. But, in that case, for whom was that blow with the stone intended?”

“Um, that’s just the difficulty. I mean, you’d be bound to know who it was you were hitting, wouldn’t you?”

“One would suppose so,” said Mrs. Bradley agreeably. “The goal is won, I think. This is Lowestoft Central. I think we had better have a taxi.”

A few minutes later she had paid the cab, and they walked up to the white-painted front door and rang the bell. The parlour maid who opened it said that she would find out whether Mrs. Platt was in, and gave them seats in the lounge, where they were stared at angrily by a white-moustached

gentleman with a newspaper, curiously by two ladies wearing shawls, rudely by a bright young thing in the uniform of the A.T.S., and frankly and naturally by a child of six.

The parlour maid returned with Mrs. Platt.

"…and so you are prepared positively to identify the clothes?" said Mrs. Bradley, when the object of the visit had been stated.

"If they are—were—are my sister-in-law's, I am." replied Mrs. Platt. "But I tell you, Mrs. Lestrange Bradley, that I have taken advice about my course of action, and I am going to say, if things actually come to the point…"

"That is, to a court of law and a trial for murder," said Mrs. Bradley.

"…that I did not identify the body because I had not the slightest idea that it could possibly have been my poor sister-in-law who had suffered that terrible end."

"But suppose Doctor Lecky informs the court—as I rather think he will—that he reported your sister-in-law's disappearance to you, and, later, suggested that the body might be hers, and that you had better go down and have a look at it?"

"I shall deny what Lecky says. His reputation…"

"You are frank, Mrs. Platt."

"I have taken advice, and I shall act on it. I am reliably informed that Doctor Lecky's reputation is bound to go against him, and that nobody is going to be unwise enough to put him into the witness-box."

"I see," said Mrs. Bradley. Mrs. Platt looked maliciously triumphant.

"In fact," she continued, "I don't know that I am prepared to identify the clothes, and to declare that they belonged to poor Miss Platt. I don't know that I am going anywhere near those clothes. As for you!" she added, turning on Pat, "I don't know that you will remain much longer on the staff of the *Willington Record*."

"Too right, Mrs. Platt," replied the young reporter, with a demure glance at Mrs. Bradley. "I am going to work on a London paper instead."

Without waiting for Mrs. Bradley, she made an exit line of this trenchant speech, and then bolted for the street door. Mrs. Bradley cackled gently, and Mrs. Platt turned on her, round-eyed.

"Is that a fact?" she demanded.

"So I understand. Why should it not be a fact? Poor girl! She has worked very hard. The reward is her due," Mrs. Bradley answered. There

was a note of reminiscence in her voice which caused Mrs. Platt to enquire, with some surprise:

"Did you know her, then, before you came to Willington?"

"Oh, yes, in another incarnation," Mrs. Bradley negligently replied. Mrs. Platt snorted, and then invited her to have some tea.

"Is your secretary-companion with you?" Mrs. Bradley asked, accepting the cup which was passed to her.

"Isabella? Oh, yes. But the poor silly creature had an accident our first day here, and hasn't been able to walk. A broken ankle it is, caused by her tripping—I can't think how!—over one of those iron rings down by the fish harbour. Such a nuisance! And, of course, painful for her."

"Mrs. Platt," said Mrs. Bradley, "I know you won't think me impertinent if I ask you one more question about affairs at Willington. What caused you to engage Lillie Fletcher to be your personal maid?"

"Lillie Fletcher? But I didn't do anything of the kind."

"Our young and ambitious reporter told me that you did, and that you dismissed Lillie because you suspected her of stealing your property."

"Oh, that!" said Mrs. Platt, as though she were at a loss, and did not wish to continue the subject. "It was all most awkward."

Mrs. Bradley thought that it still seemed so, but she made no comment, and waited for Mrs. Platt to extricate herself from what appeared to be a position of some difficulty.

"You see, it was like this," said Mrs. Platt, at last. "I knew it wasn't Lillie. It was my nephew. But how could I admit that? My own sister's son! So, of course, Lillie Fletcher had to go."

"Of course," said Mrs. Bradley, with such a grimace that Mrs. Platt gazed at her in alarm. "And what did you do to make it up to Lillie?"

"Well, all that I could. I had called the police in, you see—not knowing, at the time, the truth about the thefts. He pawned my rings, Mrs. Bradley! Think of that! But I told the police I shouldn't take the case any further. They were rather disgruntled, I must say, but I couldn't take Lillie to court."

"Especially as the magistrate might have discovered the truth!"

"Yes. Well, never mind that for the moment."

"Why mind it at all? Pray go on."

"I did not press the charge, as I say, and I sent my nephew home and cut him out of my will, so he had sufficient punishment. Then I took over

the management of the ‘Beauty’ Society, and Lillie became the secretary, and I had her to my house sometimes, and I think she was sensible enough to overcome her feelings to see where her interests lay. Then the classes fell off, and Lillie took a position at the telephone exchange. I did what I could about that.”

“Mrs. Platt, why should Lillie have been murdered?”

“Really, Mrs. Lestrange Bradley, I have not the slightest idea.”

“It’s very trying. Nobody has the slightest idea,” said Mrs. Bradley, rising from the table. “Now I must go and find Pat. Our train is at half-past five.”

Pat was outside the hotel.

“I’ve been waiting half an hour,” she said. “We shall never catch our train. Thank goodness it’s a bit quicker than the one we came by. I thought I should have died on the journey down.”

“I had something of the same impression myself,” said Mrs. Bradley. Pat glanced at her sharply, but her benign and serpentine smile defeated the girl as it had baffled older and cleverer people, and they set out in silence to walk to the railway station.

“It’ll be funny travelling back in the black-out,” said Pat, at last, as the silence, to her, became oppressive.

“Yes, indeed it will,” Mrs. Bradley agreed, gazing earnestly at the back of a tall young man who was turning down Crown Score out of the High Street. By the time he was down the steps Mrs. Bradley had caught up with him, but, instead of stopping him, as the petrified Pat had expected she would do, Mrs. Bradley ran on. She tore along Whapload Road, which ran parallel with the sea, turned up Spurgeon’s Score, took St. Peter’s Street at a gallop, and did not relax until she was half-way along Clapham Road.

A train to Yarmouth was in the station. She took it, and spent the night at the Angel Hotel, in the Market Place. In the morning she went home. She had remembered to give Pat a return ticket on the outward journey, so that she had no need to worry about whether the girl had been able to get back to Willington.

Pat was reproachful when they met in Willington next day.

“I know,” said Mrs. Bradley. “But you did understand, child, didn’t you?”

“I thought you were chasing that young man, until you shot right past him. I waited some time at the steps, but gave it up, then, and walked to the

station, and got the train we had decided on. I called up Lady Selina on the ’phone, but she said she hadn’t any news of you.”

“It was good thing I left you when I did, though,” said Mrs. Bradley calmly. “We were both in very great danger.”

“Did separating put it right, then?”

“Temporarily, I feel.”

“I don’t see much point in that. What were you afraid of?”

“What were Lillie Fletcher and Councillor Smith and poor Miss Platt afraid of?”

“I don’t know,” said Pat, backing away. “Do you feel all right? I mean, you look a bit like the…the Ancient Mariner, or something. Can I get you anything?”

“If you do, I shall scream for help,” said Mrs. Bradley.

“But why on earth?”

“Somebody got coffee for Lillie Fletcher. Somebody got stout for Councillor Smith. Somebody got—we don’t know what—for Miss Platt. It seems a most risky proceeding in this town to allow anybody to get one anything.”

“Yet, in spite of all that, you had tea with Mrs. Platt,” Pat observed. Mrs. Bradley grinned but made no reply, except to remark:

“You ought to be a detective, Pat, you know.”

• 4 •

“But when did you tumble to it?” asked Stallard. “Of course, it’s as clear as mud to me now, but I’d never have seen it for myself.”

“Not even if I had been murdered in Lowestoft, child?”

“I think I’d have chased more red herrings, even then! In fact, I should have arrested Mrs. Platt.”

“Dear, dear! And how is Sally?”

“Oh, we arrived full of beans, and she stuck on hefty shoes and a tweed skirt, and went out surrounded by dogs.”

“Strange that she never wanted you for her fiancé,” said Mrs. Bradley calmly. Stallard grinned.

“Now what?”

“That was what Pat told me when I first came into the case. I think at that instant I suspected her.”

“Then you did have a theory about the crimes?”

“It was not a theory; it was a certainty. The psychological element was there in all its beauty. You see, none of the murders were motiveless, and yet the people who had the motives do not appear to be implicated. What made you, by the way, suspect that the deaths were connected?”

“Just a hunch, I think. No, honestly—you won’t believe me—I did suspect Pat from the beginning.”

“Surely not of killing Lillie Fletcher?”

“Well, I didn’t think much about that,” said the young man, not abashed. “Tell me why you suspected her, then. I mean, apart from the lie about me and Sally. By the way, spare my vanity, and so forth, if you can—how did you know it was a lie?”

“I did not say it was a lie. But you must allow me to believe I know Sally,” replied Sally’s favourite aunt. “You are not—how do the young put it?—not her type.”

“Oh, I see. So you rumbled that Pat was playing some game or other. How right you seem to have been.”

“Then,” Mrs. Bradley proceeded, “there was, throughout the whole affair, the significant point that the knowledge shown in so many ways was knowledge which Pat, alone of all the people I had met, might reasonably be expected to possess because of her work. Then, too, the murderer of Councillor Smith, it was very soon evident, was somebody who had what I may call a right of being present upon various occasions when other people, without the cloak of a professional assignment, would have been noticed and would have occasioned comment.

“Pat’s presence occasioned so little comment that it did not occur to any of the women who attended Councillor Smith’s little party to mention that she was there to report upon the meeting. The only hint I received at all of her presence at the ‘Rat and Cow-catcher’ that evening was from Councillor Woods, the landlord, who remarked that the Ladies’ Committee had hoped for a report of the meeting in the local paper. Incidentally—and this I thought significant—that report was never published. It almost seems as though Pat did not wish to advertise the fact that she had been present there that evening.”

“But wouldn’t her editor…?”

“I doubt whether he had given her that assignment. It was a private gathering, really, you see. I think she used her professional status as a cloak for getting to the meeting and poisoning Councillor Smith.”

“But the motive?”

“Primarily, the news value of the scandal, of course.”

“Secondly,” suggested Stallard, “she had been very friendly with Elvira Blackburn, and thought that, as she was going to murder a prominent townsman, it might as well benefit somebody else if possible.”

“On the other hand, the secondary motive may not exist,” said Mrs. Bradley. “Other people, as I’ve said, drank stout at that little gathering, and I did say ‘poisoning,’ not ‘killing.’”

• CHAPTER 22 •

The Rake's Progress.
Title of a series of paintings by William Hogarth.

"That's all very well," said Stallard, "and I think the same as you do, but we've had no evidence yet, to my mind, to connect Pat with that gathering."

"Yet Pat's presence, it seems to me, was clearly indicated. I imagine—but you can check this with Mrs. Councillor Zacharias, who was present from first to last—that Pat stayed for a very short time. I think—but you can check this up with Mrs. Commy-Platt—that she had taken all the notes she required before Councillor Smith's stout was poisoned. I also think that she had left the place before Mrs. Platt put in an appearance. Mrs. Platt, you will remember, arrived very late at the party."

"Of course, we are used to seeing Pat about, here, there, and everywhere, and taking no notice," Stallard agreed. "Do you think, then, that we could have found Miss Platt's clothes at Pat's lodgings? All that I wonder is why people keep such certain evidence of a crime."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Bradley, "that most people have no idea that the police can make a kind of house-to-house search for such evidence, and I expect there was some intention of blackmailing Mrs. Commy-Platt. Ah! That was another thing, too, which led me towards the truth. I think I've mentioned it before, but it deserves to be emphasised. I realised, on my first visit to her, that Mrs. Commy-Platt had something to hide. For a woman of her temperament she was far too civil to anybody who behaved as badly as I did upon that occasion. I tried her to the utmost, and, instead of resenting it, she continued to attempt to placate me."

"And what she had to hide, of course, was what she had done to poor Miss Platt, and the fact that, although she knew from Doctor Lecky that Miss Platt had left the Home, and that a body was awaiting identification at the town mortuary, she had refused to admit responsibility."

"Yes, and there again, in connection with Miss Platt, Pat's knowledge might have come in. She had visited the Home once or twice, in search of news, and had heard—you can check this up with Doctor Lecky, who, thinking that he is again to be brought to trial, is probably burning to tell you anything he can which will put somebody else in his position and let him out—something of Miss Platt's circumstances, and even—so indiscreet do I suspect Doctor Lecky to have been—her relationship to Mrs. Platt. On this foundation it would not take much for a smart youngster like Pat to have gone into the circumstances thoroughly, wormed out the whole story, and even helped in the escape."

"Yes, I see that that is possible. But what motive could Pat have had for killing the unfortunate woman?"

"To create news—if she had a motive, of course."

"Which it did, and didn't do."

"Exactly. The news of an unknown woman's suicide (as it was thought to be, you remember) roused comparatively little interest. Pat, who knew the identity of the dead woman, dared not come forward openly and announce it, but she was prepared for the news to fall flat."

"How do you deduce that? Oh, yes, of course! By the fact that the other murders took place within twenty-four hours. She did not leave herself time, though, to find out whether the news was going to create the stir that she wanted, or whether it needed decoration, did she? That seems to me a bit odd…but, well, I suppose I must arrest her…"

"No doubt, although, in my opinion, it is unwise."

"Why on earth shouldn't I arrest her?"

"Well, she has shown courage, a good deal of resource and initiative, and has demonstrated desperate ambition…"

"In fact, she only needs a swastika badge and a little black moustache," said the inspector. "Get away with you, dear Aunt."

"Well," said Mrs. Bradley judicially, "why did she conclude that the murder of Miss Platt would not create any more than a passing interest?"

"For the reason you gave just now. Of course, I can see why she should pick on Miss Platt. She hoped to create a good old local stink round the person of Mrs. Platt, realised later that it might not come off, decided to take no risks, so murdered those other people to get some excitement going. Now, allowing that you are right about Councillor Smith, why was Lillie Fletcher selected? That's what I'd like to know."

“That has been the difficulty, child. I thought at first that the murderer did intend to kill Lillie Fletcher. My doubts were occasioned when I realised that the poisoning of, for instance, my niece Sally Lestrange, would have accomplished the murderer’s object very nicely, and that the murder of my son Ferdinand would have been a master stroke because of his public position. It is true that it was Sally’s first duty at the Centre, and the murderer could not have known whether she would go outside—it was essential, you see, that the victim should leave the premises in order that the murder could take place—but the murder of Ferdinand could have been planned most carefully beforehand, since he is almost the oldest inhabitant of that Centre. Poison, of course, should have been the means in his case, as it was with Councillor Smith. Has it struck you, by the way, that, of the three, only Smith was given poison? The others were murders of violence.”

“But why Lillie Fletcher?” persisted Stallard. “I suppose her visits to her boy friend in the Auxiliary Fire Service had something to do with the affair?”

“If the right victim was selected, certainly they had. The murderer could have been pretty sure of Lillie’s time for going to see that young man. Besides that, it appears to have been known that there was some connection —you remember?—between Lillie and Mrs. Platt, from whose service the girl had been dismissed. Pat was perfectly correct in thinking that the two murders, therefore, might ‘snowball’ up into something very important in local news items, if the connection could be revealed, but this revelation was a difficult thing to manage, unless she could reveal the identity of Miss Platt without attaching suspicion to herself. Of course, it could have been managed, but Pat had a guilty conscience—a paralysing thing in the young.”

“You don’t think,” said Stallard slowly, “that I may have got Pat wrong, and that, instead of having the secondary motive of helping Elvira Blackburn to a fortune she simply thought that Fate had played into her hands by providing her with a victim who had relatives immediately suspect because they inherited the money?”

“And got rid of an incubus,” Mrs. Bradley observed. “You may be right. We have had two frightened people (not counting Mrs. Platt) in our community since the police first called upon Elvira Blackburn and her brother Melchior.”

"Then they must have had guilty consciences over something!" Stallard declared.

"Well, of course they had, poor things! They had guilty consciences because they had so often wished their uncle dead. Then they hold a special reason for being nervous, disheartened and dismayed. Melchior is a kleptomaniac—one of the very few genuine cases, I may say, that I have met!"

"Hm! I'm glad they've got an alibi for the time of the murder, anyhow! In any case, there seems no doubt that it must have been at the party that Smith got the dose which killed him. But, look here, how am I going to make all this into evidence on which to arrest Patricia Mort?"

"I must leave that to you, child. Don't forget that she's going to Finland very soon."

"She won't be able to, of course. I must get my hooks on her at once, before she slips off like that."

"Extradition, child."

"Be hanged to it. I'm not going to lose her if she's our man."

"You doubt it?"

"No, not exactly. But I can't get used to the idea. I mean…the motive. Is it sufficient, do you think?"

"For a temperament like that of Pat Mort, I'd say it was more than sufficient. Ambition is like water. It cuts its own channel, you know."

"Finds its own level, too, it seems to me. But I don't see yet how it was you felt so sure."

"Well, Sally unwittingly helped me after she had hindered me considerably."

"Sally? What did she know about it?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. But I thought at first she did. She was melancholy, frightened, reserved, uncommunicative, and distrait."

"Doesn't sound like my idea of Sally."

"Exactly. Therefore, something was wrong. I realised that the moment I saw her with Pat at the *Record* office when first I came into the enquiry."

"When first you took it over, you mean."

"It seemed to me that Sally suspected Pat. What grounds she had for doing this, I did not, and I do not, know. But perhaps…"

"We can check that up with Sally," said Stallard.

"Well, I did not ask Sally to give Pat away. I had received the hint—a strong one, as you indicate, since Sally was most unlike herself…"

"So that," said Stallard shrewdly, "was why Sally gave up her A.R.P. work and went on the land."

"Well, it seemed better to get her out of the way," said Mrs. Bradley tactfully. "Sally, however, did not know why she was persuaded by her mother and me to leave Willington, although, I think, she was glad enough to go."

"Good heavens! You didn't confide in Lady Selina that you thought Pat had committed murder and was lying in wait for Sally?"

"Not exactly. But I made myself plain enough. Selina is a sensible woman. I had only to hint that Sally was forming an undesirable attachment."

Stallard backed away from a hard and prodding forefinger, and, to change the subject, which appeared to embarrass him, asked:

"What about the other deaths? We've made very little headway there."

"Well, somebody took the body of Miss Platt from the canal to the A.R.P. tank. You remember the doctor's bit of weed? That person might (and might not) have been the murderer."

"Yes, I see. And I see where Burt comes in. I also see now why it was that Pat did not care whether the verdict was murder or suicide, so long as the body could be identified. It was the scandal, the gossip, the 'news value' of the death that mattered," Stallard observed. "Why on earth, though, not have left the body in the canal? Oh, Burt, I suppose, was an unwitting accomplice when he pulled it out, and…"

"And robbed it," said Mrs. Bradley, "thus removing all the most obvious marks of identification."

"Incidentally," said Stallard, "I suppose it was chiefly Lecky's gambling activities that made him anxious to keep himself and his Home right out of the enquiry?"

"Undoubtedly. That, and his record, on which, of course, he could be terrorised."

"And you think Pat saw that rescue, don't you? Even so, she must be a bit thick-headed to think she might have been suspected. I don't mind telling you that she's about the last person I should have thought of."

"She's young, and she has not lost her sense of right and wrong yet," said Mrs. Bradley, in a tone which gave the trite words a new significance,

although not the one assigned to them by the inspector.

"You mean…she's going off her head? Going insane?" he said.

Mrs. Bradley did not reply in any direct fashion, but answered:

"The lawyer's and the psychologist's interpretation of what is meant by insanity are not always the same thing. It is difficult to say whether the law will hold Pat responsible for her actions, but there is no justification for believing her, in your sense of the word, insane. The only thing that you yourself want now is evidence on the strength of which you can arrest her. So far, you can show some sort of motive, and you will be able to prove, with the help of eye-witnesses, that she was at the 'Rat and Cow-catcher' that night. But it is probable that a jury, especially if it happens to be composed entirely of men, will not be very much impressed. Comparatively few men can conceive that a young woman might be really keen to get on in her chosen profession—unless, of course, she happens to be a film star."

"I can't say the motive strikes me pink, as a matter of fact. But I'll accept it at your valuation. And, as you say, I ought to be able to show that Pat was present—suspiciously present—at the pub. Of course, she was also present, don't forget, when Lillie Fletcher was killed."

"Yes, but…"

"And," continued Stallard, "she has no alibi for the third, or rather, the first murder—that of Miss Platt, you know. You were pretty smart to deduce her presence at that little bottle party at the 'Rat and Cow-catcher,' and, of course, those particular women, being in the municipal doo-dah, were used to seeing her about. But there's one thing we'll have to establish. Where did she get the arsenic? I know it only killed one out of the three, and that because his inside was in such a funny state, but it might have been a contributory cause of death in the other two cases, since few people could have reckoned on bumping off a tough young girl like Lillie Fletcher or even a middle-aged semi-loony like Miss Platt, without rendering them pretty helpless first."

"You should have very little trouble in tracing the possession of arsenic to Pat," said Mrs. Bradley. "I'll tell you where she could have got it."

"Yes?"

"Do you remember that she called at Lillie Fletcher's home last year to interview Mr. Fletcher about his prize vegetables?"

"Weed-killer!" shouted Stallard. "Of course! That's a classic by now!"

“Yes. It is interesting, by the way, how neurotics always contrive to give themselves away. It’s impossible for them to keep a secret.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, there was no reason, so far as I could determine at the time, for Pat to tell me all about Mr. Fletcher and his prize marrow, or whatever it was. There was no place for it in the conversation, yet she forced the information upon me. It was clear that, for some reason, it was uppermost in her mind, and I wondered why.”

“But you didn’t wonder for long! Well, I can get to work on that. I suppose Mr. Fletcher does keep arsenical weed-killer on the premises?”

“You can soon find out, but I don’t think there’s any doubt about it.”

“And she mucked up the diving board to get Burt injured—killed, perhaps—because she knew he’d been talking to you? I shouldn’t have thought she’d have known enough about diving boards to do it, but it seems that she had drawn the attention of Tom Talby to the fact that the board was insecure. Still,” he added thoughtfully, “it wasn’t insecure then. I suppose she was paving her way, but it does look rather suspicious.”

“I think Pat made a mistake.”

“Still, you know, when you come to think of it, that business of Tom’s being lured to the Town Hall and locked in that cupboard so that he could not risk his life on the board was very clumsy,” said Stallard.

“Strange that Eddie Burt escaped unharmed,” Mrs. Bradley added.

“And then you mean she had another go at him when the crowds surged out on the air raid signal?”

“Well, I don’t think we could prove that, child. Burt declares that he was deliberately attacked, and the circumstances so favoured the attacker that I doubt whether any enquiries would lead to anything, especially after all this time. Your first efforts, you remember, were fruitless.”

“And you didn’t make any, I noticed. You were, as usual, right about that. Too tricky. I shall leave it alone. I say, no wonder you sprinted for life in Lowestoft! Hope you haven’t passed your danger on to me.”

“Well, information shared is danger halved,” said Mrs. Bradley, grinning.

“Or doubled,” said Stallard, answering the grin. “By the way, reverting to the murder of Miss Platt: what was all that about the night-gown?”

“It was a very clumsy attempt to mislead the police, I fancy. Then, of course, Pat brought Mrs. Platt into the picture by observing that the corpse

wore a night-gown which bore Mrs. Platt's old laundry mark. She overreached herself, however, by throwing the other night-gown into Mr. Dewey's garden."

"So a detailed analysis of Pat's movements on the evening and night of the murders could read something like this," said Stallard.

"Sunset to dusk—pushed Miss Platt into the river and watched her drown. Then saw Burt rescue the body and rob it. Recognised him. Came out of hiding directly he had run off with the handbag, and dragged the body in among the bushes.

"About eight o'clock, having been to her lodgings and changed her clothes, which were probably soiled and damp, went to report on the party given by Councillor Smith at the 'Rat and Cow-catcher.' Poisoned Councillor Smith's first glass of stout…"

"Possibly at the bar," interpolated Mrs. Bradley, "and not at the table…"

"What? Of course, that would have been easier, especially if she volunteered to help carry some of the drinks to the table. In some saloon bars they bring you the drinks, but I doubt whether they'd bother at the 'Rat and Cow-catcher.' I suppose there you pay over the counter and then cart the drinks to where you want to sit and have them. But, if she did that (a) wouldn't someone have remarked upon the fact? And (b) how could she be certain that Councillor Smith would get the poisoned glass?"

"The only person to remark upon the fact (a), I think," Mrs. Bradley answered, "would have been Councillor Smith himself, who would have taken the glasses from her, and he died before suspicion could fall on anyone of having caused his death and before explanations or remarks were necessary. As to the poisoned glass, I thought it was clear that it did not much matter who got it. Any of the persons present would have been a good news-item in a local murder case."

"Oh…yes, you did suggest that. Well, early in the proceedings, Pat left —or it appeared so. She was forgotten. Old Smith continued to make his little stag jokes and to pass his dubious compliments, and one by one his guests departed, leaving little Mrs. Zacharias to sign on the dotted line. Old Smith, then feeling much the worse for wear, wants the last drink on the house, but staggers (not drunk, but poisoned), towards his home. Pat sees him collapse, stands him up in a doorway, and then bunks for all she's worth to the Town Hall, where she's supposed to be on A.R.P. duty. There

she poisons Lillie Fletcher's coffee, and belts her over the head with a stone.

"Meanwhile, between her own departure and that of Smith from the 'Rat and Cow-catcher,' she has been back to the river, dragged out Miss Platt's body from the bushes, hauled it up a steepish hill to the A.R.P. cistern, and bunged it in. Oh, and of course, she undressed it, taking the clothes to her digs, and then got it up in the night-gown. It sounds a pretty good night's work for one young girl!"

"Take it or leave it," said Mrs. Bradley, grinning. "I've told you I didn't think the murders were connected to that extent."

"Thank you, I'll take it. I ought to be able to check the whole thing up. You did think the murders are interdependent but that Pat didn't do all three. What are you going to do now?"

"Begin another Balaclava helmet, unless I take the plunge, and decide upon a pair of sea-boot stockings."

She hooted with laughter at his reproachful expression.

• CHAPTER 23 •

Decorated in deep underglaze blue with five-clawed dragons among conventional clouds.
Catalogue description of a porcelain bowl and cover with the Hsuan Te mark, of the period 1426–35.

• 1 •

"And now," said Mrs. Bradley, "we have to get Mrs. Commy-Platt to return to Willington. How can we manage it, do you think?"

"Need we expect her to come back? I could get her to make a statement," replied Stallard. He buttered a scone, and then looked up at his visitor, but Mrs. Bradley, smoothing the sleeve of a canary-coloured blouse, was gazing at her wristlet watch.

"What are you getting at, dear Aunt?" Stallard suddenly enquired.

"Nothing, child. We shall have to find out what Mrs. Platt was doing when Lillie Fletcher was murdered. There's that hour to be accounted for. We've got to establish what connection, if any, there is between Pat and Mrs. Platt, Mrs. Platt and Burt, Burt and Tom Talby, Isabella and Councillor Grant's Sons of God Macedonian, and…"

"Half a minute," said Stallard.

• 2 •

"But I still don't see why you ran like that at Lowestoft," said Pat. "You gave me the fright of my life. In fact, not to put too fine a point upon it…"

"Ah!" said Mrs. Bradley, rapturously.

"Eh?"

"The cliché."

"Oh…" The girl laughed. "Stop it, and give me your advice. How far up the arm would you have my woollen gloves? To the elbow? Or about half-way up? And shall I want ski-ing boots? And does it matter that I've never learnt how to ski?"

"Listen, Pat," said Mrs. Bradley. "Do you want to be arrested for murder?"

"What?"

"Do you want to be arrested for murder?"

"No. But I couldn't be."

"No?"

"Well, what do you mean?" She was smiling, but her eyes had become anxious. "What do they think I've been doing?"

"Well, Inspector Stallard is under the firm impression that you murdered Coun…"

"What?"

"…cillor Smith, Lillie Fletcher…"

"But it's a lot of rot! Of course I didn't! How could I?"

"…and Mrs. Platt's late husband's sister."

"Oh?" said Pat. "So that's come to light at last."

"It has been in the full glare for some little time, child. What on earth possessed you to throw that silly night-gown over the wall?"

"I…I thought it would be a good idea. I mean, I thought at the time it was good. I've realised since that it was rather stupid and mean. I ought to have come right out with what I knew."

"I'll tell you one thing you didn't know," said Mrs. Bradley. "You didn't know that Mrs. Platt had changed her laundry mark."

"No. I had a fit, and wondered whether perhaps I ought to confess, when Ronald began to chivvy that poor Mrs. What's-it up the hill." Her colour, which, ebbing, had left the fair skin pale gold, came back, and her eyes grew brighter. "You don't think I did it, then, really?"

"Well," said Mrs. Bradley cautiously, "there are one or two things against you, notably the fact that you did not trouble to remind the inspector of the fact that you were present at that meeting of the Ladies' Committee at the 'Rat and Cow-catcher.'"

"But I wasn't there!" said Pat.

It was Mrs. Bradley's turn to look astounded.

“It was that ass Eves,” said Pat, with some bitterness. “I’d been covering Councillor Commy’s Back to the Land meeting at the Assembly Rooms. I’d rather have done the ‘Rat and Cow-catcher,’ much, and when Councillor Smith died after it I was doubly annoyed that I hadn’t been there.”

“And can you prove that you were at Councillor Commy’s meeting?” Mrs. Bradley enquired. Pat looked doubtful.

“Somebody may have noticed me,” she said. “I sat at the end of the front row, with six empty chairs between me and Councillor Petty. I don’t know whether he saw me.”

“Who was in the row behind?”

“Nobody. Don’t you know those sort of meetings? The Councillors and their wives sit in the front row—all those that aren’t on the platform—and then the Press is given the seat at the very end of the front row, then the audience occupies about five solid rows at the very back of the hall. It’s in vain for the people on the platform to beseech the audience to come up nearer the front. They simply won’t budge.”

“Interesting. Well, my advice to you is to go forth, here and now, and produce some two or three respectable witnesses who are prepared to swear that you were at that meeting and stayed until…how long did it last?”

“I couldn’t possibly tell you,” said Pat lugubriously. “I only stayed long enough to get Councillor Commy down in shorthand. After that I came back here to my digs and got out my column.”

“Was your landlady in when you arrived?”

“No. Pictures. And I was in bed when she did come in, because I knew I’d got to be at the Report Centre at ten, and I was trying to get an hour’s snooze before I went, as it meant an all-night duty, so I didn’t even answer when she called to me up the stairs.”

“Did you see her before you went?”

“Yes. At ten minutes to ten. She gave me a packet of sandwiches to take with me.”

“And Councillor Smith wanted the last drink on the house that night. And you were at the Report Centre when Lillie Fletcher was killed. What about the afternoon? Where were you at just before sunset?”

Pat looked anxious again.

“That’s the devil of it,” she said. “I had a puncture in the back tyre of my push-bike and was putting it to rights just outside Winborough at sunset.

I was scared stiff in case I couldn't get back before the black-out, because I hadn't any lights."

"And nobody saw you, of course?"

"I don't think so. One or two cars went by, but nobody on foot, and nobody else with a bike."

"What about the people from Bewley's works?"

"I…I don't know."

"Pat, don't lie. It won't do the least bit of good," said Mrs. Bradley kindly. "You weren't outside Winborough at sunset. You were on the towing path, and you saw Burt drag the body of Miss Platt from the canal."

She thought at first that the girl was going to faint, but she recovered herself and said at once:

"All right, then. I admit it."

"That's better," said Mrs. Bradley cheerfully. "What were you doing on the towing path?"

"Nothing. Only walking along. Then I saw what I thought must be an accident, and I saw Eddie Burt dive in."

"Did you see anybody else?"

"No. I saw Eddie go in, and I watched, and…and made a few shorthand notes, because it might be something for the paper, and then I saw Eddie rob the body."

"What did he take?"

"A purse, I think. There wasn't a handbag, unless the woman had dropped it in the water."

"I want to understand this part of the story clearly. What was Burt doing before he dived into the river?"

"I can't tell you, really, or I would. I was too far round the loop of the river. I heard a splash, and hurried forward, and then Eddie went in…"

"Where from?"

"The island, I should think."

"Did you see Joe Canopy's barge go by on the canal?"

"I can't remember. I didn't notice much except Eddie rescuing the woman."

"How did he get the woman out?"

"He swam to the lowest part of the bank, where the little boys stand on a kind of mud-spit to fish for tiddlers, and sort of pushed her in front of him. It wasn't any of the life-saving methods I've been taught."

"Did he try artificial respiration for the resuscitation of the apparently drowned?"

"No. He just felt in all the pockets, found something—the purse, I think—and pocketed it, and then he saw the woman's hat, and went back for it, but afterwards he threw it in again. Then he went off, and I went up and had a look at the woman, but I felt quite certain she was dead."

"But you didn't go for a doctor or the police?"

"No. I…I knew there was nothing to be done for her and…I recognised her, you see."

"As…?"

"Well, as one of Doctor Lecky's patients. And then I recognised her clothes."

"Oh, you did?"

"Yes, but I didn't think much of that at first, because, after all, Mrs. Platt used to give her clothes away to all sorts of people. But then it seemed to me odd that anybody from Doctor Lecky's Home—which is pretty expensive, you know; quite as expensive as the ordinary fashionable nursing home—should be in need of charity from Mrs. Platt, and then, of course, it dawned on me that there must be another explanation."

She paused. Mrs. Bradley watched her.

"So you hid the body?" she prompted.

"Yes. I dragged it under some bushes, to give me a chance of thinking out how best I could use the knowledge I had, and make a real newspaper sensation. I argued…" she glanced at Mrs. Bradley, but the black eyes were entirely noncommittal—"that as the woman was dead (I did have a try at pumping her arms and so forth, but I knew that she was absolutely dead, so I didn't keep it up for very long) it couldn't matter to her what I did with her body, and it might make all the difference in the world to my career. So I went to Doctor Lecky's house, leaving the body hidden (naturally I didn't dream of murder!) and told him that Mrs. Platt wanted one of Miss Platt's night-gowns.

"He tried to bluff me at first, but I wasn't having any. I told him that I knew Miss Platt had left the Home, and that Mrs. Platt knew all about it. I risked these shots in the dark, and they came off pretty well. I was allowed to take two night-gowns, and I…well, I put one on the body, and took the other, and the clothes home with me."

"How?"

"Just over my arm. It was dark by the time I'd finished, you see, and I knew my way about Willington blindfold. Nobody would notice, I knew, and I've got my own latch-key, and could smuggle them past my landlady all right.

"The only thing that worried me was how to use the body to the best advantage for a write-up, and how, having disposed of it, to make sure it should be found all right—next day, if possible—and yet not look too obviously planted.

"As well as all this, of course, I had to be on duty at the 'Rat and Cow-catcher' to report that silly meeting at eight o'clock, and get to the Report Centre for my night duty at the telephones. I did not want to arouse any suspicion, you see, by not being in my usual haunts."

"It's almost a pity you weren't the murderer," said Mrs. Bradley admiringly. "I believe you would have…"

"Got away with it? Yes, but you haven't heard all. When I left the 'Rat and Cow-catcher'…"

"So you did report the meeting at the 'Rat and Cow-catcher'?"

"Yes. I was lying just now when I said I reported the other meeting instead. I was scared. I suppose I am still, but you've got to remember that I really didn't dream that the woman had been shoved in the river by a murderer; I just thought of myself as pulling some A. J. Alan sort of stuff with, this time, a convenient instead of an inconvenient corpse."

"Yes. I understand that. But, when you left the 'Rat and Cow-catcher' and got back to your bushes by the side of the river, almost opposite the island, you found that the body was gone."

"How on earth can you possibly know that?"

"Because, although you dressed the body in the night-gown, you didn't put the body in the A.R.P. tank. You're not strong enough. Besides, I don't suppose you'd have thought of such a thing."

"I wish I had," said Pat enviously. "it was an absolutely wonderful idea. It made the write-up, when those kids discovered the corpse, the easiest stuff in the world, and there was my sensation ready-made."

"You made good use of it," said Mrs. Bradley dryly. Pat flushed.

"Suppose I did!" she said. "I've never had a break all my life. I've always collected the loser's end. I ought to have gone to college. I've got the brains, and I've got the will to get on. I could have done well, but I've never had chances; I've always had to make them. I've never been very

successful, either, until now. I saw this chance, and I took it. What are you going to do? I suppose you'll queer my pitch somehow."

"Why should I?" said Mrs. Bradley. "The woman was dead, as you say. Why should you have any sentimental regard for the body of someone you didn't even know?"

"Well, of course, I did know her," said Pat unwillingly. "I'd been up to Doctor Lecky once or twice to see if he would give me anything for the paper. He never did, but I talked to Miss Platt each time, and that's how I found out who she was. I was lucky over that. She was having a lucid interval, and she spilt the whole story about Mrs. Platt, and the late Mr. Platt and the money.

"I'd wondered for months how to use it. I didn't like Mrs. Platt—I don't believe anybody did—and I knew that a local scandal about her would be meat and drink to the paper, and send up the circulation to double, if only I could get my editor to print it. But that was the rub. I knew he'd be afraid. You'd be amazed at the amount of influence a rich, ill-natured, bossy old woman can have in a place like this.

"Then came this big chance. I knew he would have to print details of Mrs. Platt's sister's death, but I couldn't at first see how to involve Mrs. Platt. I didn't want to be the one to declare that the dead woman was Mrs. Platt's late husband's sister, so I thought of the night-gown-over-the-wall stunt. Still, that misfired, of course."

"Not altogether. It added just a little to my first conception of Mrs. Platt as the murderer," Mrs. Bradley pointed out, "and made it a little difficult at first to account for the changed laundry mark. And now," she continued more briskly, "let's get on to the death of Councillor Smith. I shan't bother to ask you at what time you left the 'Rat and Cow-catcher,' because I can get Councillor Woods or his barmaid to tell me that. But I confess I should like to know whether you saw the poison put into his glass?"

"No," said the girl positively.

"Ah. Now about Lillie Fletcher."

"I don't know anything about her except what Sally and I have already told you. The only thing is, as I said before, I'm glad I didn't read that silly note, or you might have suspected me of killing her."

"Ah, yes, Pat, why did Sally at first suspect you?"

“But…she didn’t! Sally was miserable because she had just found out that Ronald Stallard was engaged.”

“So your part in the affair is as follows: You saw Burt rescue the body of Miss Platt. You saw him rob the body and run away. You thought there was something in the affair for your paper. You knew that the dead woman was Miss Platt, and you noticed that she was wearing Mrs. Platt’s cast-off clothes which an inmate of Doctor Lecky’s home should not have needed. This helped to establish the relationship between them, but for which Miss Platt would be well enough off to have respectable clothes of her own. You decided to lay bare the scandal concerning Mrs. Platt. This came to nothing, however, because nobody seemed smart enough to connect the night-gown found on the body with the night-gown you tore with your teeth and threw over the fishmonger’s fence. Too late you discovered that Mrs. Platt had changed her laundry mark, and that this fact had blinded the police to the identity of the drowned woman.”

“That’s quite correct,” said Pat.

“Now you think that Burt transported the body to the A.R.P. cistern, possibly because he was acting in collusion with Mrs. Platt, or possibly because he was afraid someone had seen him rescue the body and might accuse him of murder.”

“Well, all I can say is that I saw the rescue. Besides, why should he murder her? There was only one person who could possibly benefit by her death, and that was Mrs. Platt. And then, who else, besides Mrs. Platt, could have got her to go for a walk down there by the canal? She wouldn’t have gone with Eddie Burt.”

“Perfectly true. But if Burt had nothing to fear, why should he move the body? Still more, why should he go to keep watch over the tank next day?”

“Did he do that?”

“According to the boy Lionel Percy, he did.”

“Oh? I didn’t know that.”

“And now tell me why you went for a walk by the canal at that extraordinary hour of the day, Pat.”

“I…Oh, hang it! I suppose you know, so I might as well confess to it. I was snooping. I had trailed Miss Platt…”

“But why? You couldn’t have known the exact day and hour when Miss Platt was going to remove herself from Doctor Lecky’s charge.”

"What do you mean?" asked Pat. She looked puzzled and frightened. "Of course I knew. I was the person who planned the escape. Surely you guessed I did! I'd arranged to meet her there. We were going to walk that way, along the towing path, to Winborough to see a lawyer. She had promised, if I helped her, not to mention my name to Mrs. Platt. But, when I got there…"

"You had given her the cast-off clothes, then?"

"Yes. But when I got there, she was dead."

• 3 •

"But I thought we agreed it was Pat," said the inspector. Mrs. Bradley chuckled.

"Do you remember your own reconstruction of the night of the crimes?" she asked. "It would have been impossible for anyone but Hercules to have carried out the succession of operations you were forced to attribute to one young girl."

"She's big and hefty, though. And she's got heaps of determination and pluck."

"She's tall; neither big nor hefty. And, as you yourself showed clearly enough, the murderer of Councillor Smith, Miss Platt, and poor Lillie Fletcher could not have managed without an accomplice—either a willing or an unwilling one, I might say."

"And you realised that at the beginning?"

"Yes, I did. I also knew that Eddie Burt had staged his own accident on the diving boards and faked his own abdominal injury in the Baths laundry. All this was to throw me off the scent. Our Mr. Burt 'lacks his nerve,' as he himself will be the first to tell you. He saw Joe Canopy's barge go by that evening, and his fear was that Joe had seen the rescue, would report it when he tied up in Willington for the night, and accuse Burt of robbery and murder. It is not in our Mr. Burt's nature, you see, to keep his hands off anybody's purse, whatever the risk to himself. Then, when he discovered that somebody else had also seen the 'rescue,' and had moved the body, he was even more alarmed."

"A pretty piece of work he is!" said the inspector. "And, of course, I can see that Mrs. Platt had the motive for wanting Miss Platt out of the way,

and collaring all the money…"

"Especially after Doctor Lecky had warned her that Miss Platt had regained full possession of her faculties, and was actuated by a lively regard for her rights in her brother's property."

"Yes, all that for granted, but why Smith, and, most of all, why Lillie Fletcher?"

"Yes. Why Lillie Fletcher? It's of no use to blame Mrs. Platt, except indirectly, there."

"No? But we agreed, I thought, that all three murders were connected?"

"So they were, but not quite in the way that you meant, as I've said before."

"But all our evidence against Pat seemed so complete. I mean, take those night-gowns. Obviously, since the wind was in the wrong direction for anything to have blown from the laundry into Dewey's garden, somebody threw that night-gown over. I thought you had decided Pat had done so."

"True enough, child; so she had. She even admits as much, and, of course, she told me that she had stayed the night once at Mrs. Platt's house. Therefore she could have known her laundry mark, because it would have been put on sheets, pillow-cases, towels, tablecloths, duchesse sets—I suppose Mrs. Platt uses those?—and table napkins. But she stayed there, again by her own admission, more than two years ago, before Mrs. Platt's laundry mark was changed."

"Yes. I wondered why you were so persistent with old Dewey about those night-gowns. But, look here, how did you tumble to Eddie Burt as the person who put the body in the tank?"

"He was on the spot just before the boys found the body. That might have been coincidence, but was interesting. Then, although he admitted that he pulled the dead body out of the water, he gave no convincing account of his movements otherwise, either before of after the rescue. All the same, he felt that we were becoming suspicious. He knew that the diving board was dangerous the first time he dived from it (as Pat and I both knew. I was watching her during that gala), and yet he dived from it again. He had to, to stage the apparent attempt on his own life. There was nothing wrong with him when I attended him in the Baths laundry after the gala…"

"He was sick, though, wasn't he?"

"Yes, I made him sick. I thought he deserved it for trying to deceive us."

"But why did you send him to hospital, then, and have him kept there?"

"Chiefly because I wanted to be certain that he was kept out of mischief for a day or two whilst I continued my investigations."

"Did you suspect Pat of murdering Miss Platt, and Burt of having been a witness of the deed?"

"I have had my moments of doubt. The murders meant a good deal to Pat, and she was the person who had commented upon the diving board, and had pointed out that it was a little out of the straight. But, of course, it was far more likely that a man had tampered with the board, rather than that a girl had done so. Burt could have climbed up on to those boards without risk of exciting suspicion, even if he were fully dressed. Everybody knew him as an expert. Pat would have been suspect at once, if anybody had caught her up there, particularly at a time when the bath was supposed to be closed to the general public. I decided, therefore, that she had not tampered with the boards, that she had no ill-will, therefore, towards Burt, and that my conducting of the enquiry into the death of Miss Platt could be causing her no special discomfort."

"But what about Councillor Smith and Lillie Fletcher?"

"Before I answer that question, child, doesn't anything strike you about the murder of Lillie Fletcher?"

"Well, only that it was messy…and…er…non-arsenical."

"Exactly." She looked at him with crocodile intelligence and a thin-lipped crocodile grin. "So, in a way, it resembled the death of Miss Platt, did it not?"

"Oh?" said Stallard.

"Yes, child. We have the death by violence of Miss Platt—followed, it is true, by the extraordinary behaviour of our Mr. Burt in disposing of the body—and that death was followed by the death by poison of Councillor Smith. Then we have the untidy, messy, bloody death of that poor girl at the Report Centre."

"Er…" said the inspector, helplessly.

"The hand," pursued Mrs. Bradley, "is the hand of Esau, but the voice is the voice of Jacob. In other words, the only true connection is between the two deaths by violence."

"Meaning?"

"Don't be aggrieved, child. Meaning that somebody set upon Lillie with that great stone from the rockery and beat her brains out."

"Doesn't sound like Mrs. Platt to me. But, then, if you're right…Oh, dash it! I don't know!"

"I also find myself unable to believe that she was responsible for propping up his dead body in a shop doorway," said Mrs. Bradley.

"I wonder what she did intend to do, then? Because it seems fairly clear that it was due to accident that the arsenic put in his glass of stout was enough to do for him. I mean it might not have killed a person with a normal inside. But, of course, you know, she may have attended public functions at which he was present, and so have learned…"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Well, anyway, where did he die? Certainly not where he was found. Yet she'd hardly have run the risk of bringing a dead body back to the shop doorway in the—even in the—black-out, and propping it there for anybody to find?"

"Patricia Mort put it there, I think."

"So she is involved!"

"Certainly, child. Pat was greatly disappointed when she found that the body of Miss Platt had disappeared from the bushes where she had left it. Then she had to attend that meeting—to her a stupid affair—of Councillor Commy's when she wanted to get to the 'Rat and Cow-catcher.'"

"Oh, yes, I see. To get an exclusive story of the wager. I presume that Smith, feeling thoroughly ill, refused to talk to her, so she more or less dogged his footsteps until he collapsed and died. Mrs. Platt probably thought he was horribly drunk—he would have been very sick before he died—and I imagine that she soon abandoned him. Even so, she was later home than she had intended, and she cooked that record book of hers after she heard that he had died, to show that she had gone straight home from the 'Rat and Cow-catcher.' Pat, who had remained in the offing, now saw a chance (she thought) of getting some sensational news for the paper. But she wanted something more spectacular than a mere body found dead on the way home, and I suppose that she had no idea at all that he had been poisoned. She probably thought he had dropped dead of heart failure. She may even have heard—for really she seems to hear everything—about his funny inside, and thought it had gone back on him at last. So she dragged

him back in the black-out—the moon wouldn't have risen by that time—propped him up in the doorway, hoping that's where the police would find him next morning, and cut across the road to the Town Hall to go on duty at the Report Centre. What, then, of Lillie Fletcher? And, anyhow, how can you prove that Mrs. Platt poisoned his stout? Far more likely to have been Pat."

"You haven't yet returned to a fundamental fact which we established, I thought, some time ago," said Mrs. Bradley, who had listened with a saurian grin to the dissertation.

"What's that?"

"That Pat certainly knew he was poisoned. If she had thought otherwise, she must have come forward and helped Mrs. Platt in her ministrations, surely, if your reconstruction of that hour is correct?"

"But…"

"Mrs. Platt had made no mention of Pat," said Mrs. Bradley. "And Mrs. Platt, remember, could have had no reason for propping poor Smith in a doorway. Her only plan was to leave him where he was."

"But…"

"Don't you see," said Mrs. Bradley earnestly, "that Councillor Smith had yielded to Mrs. Platt's representations, and that they were going to be married?"

"Oh, I see!" said Stallard, for the first time giving her a glance of admiration. "I see! So she had to get rid of Miss Platt, who was claiming half the money, and that's the true motive for the murder of Miss Platt, and it wasn't Eddie Burt, after all!"

"But it was Pat who killed Councillor Smith, as we decided before, if you remember," said Mrs. Bradley gently. "Poor Pat, who intended to make a local stir, but quite intended that the victim should recover."

"But you said…"

"I know. And we've made a little progress, I feel."

"But what put you on to the Platt business—Miss Platt being in Lecky's Home—at all?"

"My red-haired patient first. Then, of course, I was looking all the time for someone who could fill up the gaps in the story. I was vouchsafed the valuable assistance of your own Constable Commy."

"But the red-haired patient?"

“Yes, child. You wouldn’t remember, perhaps, but she was everlastingly plaiting things. Don’t you remember her sitting on that grave?”

“Plaiting…plaiting…Oh, platting! Well, I’m damned!”

“Obviously learned behaviour, because not characteristic of her malady,” Mrs. Bradley observed. “Miss Platt had taught her, don’t you see, in the faint hope that some day her occupation might excite the interest of…”

“A real mental specialist, like you! And it did,” said Stallard, grinning.

“I can see you don’t appreciate all this,” said Mrs. Bradley, poking him in the ribs. “Anyhow, you’d better apply for a warrant, and then we’ll make quite sure by reconstructing that night at the Report Centre. I think I know the routine there. We mustn’t make mistakes. I wonder whether Ferdinand will come and perform his part?”

• CHAPTER 24 •

Two studies of a horse.
Drawing by Leonardo da Vinci.

• 1 •

Mrs. Commy-Platt proved to be unexpectedly accommodating. She returned to Willington from Lowestoft without having to be asked to do so. Her reason (given to the inspector and Mrs. Bradley, who called on her together when they received the news that she had returned), was that Lowestoft was far too vulnerable a spot in which to spend the remainder of the war.

No comment was made upon this statement by her hearers, who included Isabella, and Mrs. Bradley broke a slightly embarrassing silence by saying:

"We want you to tell us, Mrs. Platt, why you made a mistake of an hour in your little book for the night on which three people in this town were murdered."

"I've already explained…" said Mrs. Platt. "And also, I would thank you to remember that I am the very last person with whom my poor husband's sister would have consented to go for a walk by the canal or anywhere else."

"Well," said Stallard, conceding the point, "you must please account for that hour. We know that you had considerable interest in the death of your late husband's sister, and that your relations with Councillor Smith had been somewhat strained. I suggest that you poisoned Councillor Smith, and that you persuaded Miss Platt to accompany you for a walk along the canal or, rather, the river, in which, a little later, she was drowned."

Mrs. Platt looked at Isabella and pointed to the door. Isabella, however, stood her ground.

“No, Mrs. Commy-Platt,” she said decidedly, “I got you into this trouble, and I’m going to stay and see fair play. Please don’t forget that I’m a warden, and that you are in my district.”

“Ah, yes,” said Mrs. Bradley, before anyone else could speak. “And what is your connection, may I ask, with the Sons of God Macedonian?”

“I have never heard of them, Mrs. Lestrange Bradley.”

“You deny that you visited them on that evening of the last air raid warning?”

“Certainly I do. I was on duty that evening, and attended no meeting of any sort.”

“Can you prove that?”

“I can only refer you,” said Isabella, with the calmness of complete triumph, “to your own relative, dear Lady Selina Lestrange. I was with her from eight o’clock until midnight. And that is why I cannot be in a position to say when Mrs. Platt came in. I mistook the evening. And since dear Mrs. Platt is too modest to refer to the matter, I may tell you that the late Councillor Smith had proposed to Mrs. Platt, and that she had accepted him, so, you see, she would have been the very last person to wish to poison him.”

“That settles that, then,” said Stallard. “Did you have to knock anybody up about lights that night?”

“I did not patrol my district that night. I was gastrically inclined, and dear Lady Selina ministered to me at the Wardens’ Post in East Lane. I think the sound of the siren must have upset me.”

“Some warden!” muttered Stallard in Mrs. Bradley’s ear. “Now, Mrs. Platt,” he said aloud. “You were late, I think, for your appointment at the ‘Rat and Cow-catcher.’”

“Certainly, Inspector. I was late, as I have already explained to Mrs. Bradley, because I could hardly be expected to forgo my dinner in order to keep an appointment of such a nature.”

“So,” said the inspector, winking at Mrs. Bradley, “you didn’t go for a walk with Miss Platt beside the river and push her in before skedaddling off to keep your date with Councillor Smith?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Inspector! I am not in the habit of pushing people into rivers.” She raised her voice. “I have only one regret. I am sorry that I did not trouble to go down to the mortuary—horrid place!—and see

this dead woman whom you assert was my late husband's sister. Still, I doubt whether I can be held responsible before the law about that."

"I doubt it, too," said Stallard. "Very well, Mrs. Platt. I am sorry I have put you to so much trouble, but I must ask one more question. How did you spend that hour which we cannot account for?"

"I walked out of the tavern, into a taxi, and came straight home," persisted Mrs. Platt.

"The next business is at the Report Centre," said Mrs. Bradley. She wished Mrs. Platt good-bye.

"Surely we'd better check those statements of the old girl's, hadn't we?" said Stallard.

"I feel that her statements are correct, child. When one thinks it over, it does appear unlikely that Miss Platt would have left Doctor Lecky's Home so trustfully in the company of the woman who had wronged her, and whose quite rational desire it was to keep her out of the way. Even the most simple-minded person…"

"Ah, well, but the poor old thing was soft in the head, don't forget."

"Even that would not account for her behaviour, if she allowed herself to walk out in company with Mrs. Platt. No, no! She went to meet Pat, I've no doubt. Come, leave that point for a bit, and let us get to the Report Centre. I have permission from the supervisor to conduct a little experiment."

Unwillingly Stallard accompanied her, and followed her up the two stone steps to the gas-proof door of the Centre. Ferdinand came to welcome them. There was an air of excitement in the place. The A.R.P. workers apparently had been primed—by Ferdinand, Stallard supposed—in the parts they were to play.

"I suppose the staff here is not the same as it was on the night of the murder?" he murmured in Mrs. Bradley's ear.

"Exactly the same," she answered, "so far as the permanent staff is concerned. I waited especially for that. They work on a rota, as you know. Of course the teachers cannot be here, as they are at school this afternoon, and Sally is still in Scotland. Pat, I hope, will turn up. I want her rather particularly. And now," she added, consulting her notebook, "I want somebody—anybody—no, it had better be you, Inspector—to take the part of the dead girl. Where did she sit? There? Oh, thank you. Sit down, Inspector.

“Now, then, everybody. Ah, hullo, here’s Pat. Good. Sit down. Are you all ready? I want the two people who first went out with the torch, to go out again. Don’t be afraid. There are police outside to protect you.”

Two of the girls took down the Emergency torch.

“Now, Mr. Budge,” said Mrs. Bradley.

The Control Room messenger, smirking nervously, put his head in at the open hatchway and enquired:

“’Ow many ladies wants coffee?”

The coffee was produced, and was passed from hand to hand. Nobody seemed to want to drink it.

“Well,” said Mrs. Bradley surveying the helpless-looking group with some amusement, “what is the matter with the coffee?”

They looked at her dumbly. She cackled.

“There’s no arsenic in it,” she said. “There wasn’t before, you know. And now, Inspector, we’ll take it for granted that you have drunk your coffee. You may take the official torch and go outside. I think I’d like to come with you. We’d better have some witnesses for this. Oh, and Pat, you come along as well.”

She put her head through the hatchway and called to her son. The faithful Simmonds followed Ferdinand and they were joined (surreptitiously, Mrs. Bradley noticed) by a big young man in plus fours who proved, on enquiry afterwards, to be Mr. Arthur, the surgeon who had been called out to look at the body.

“Now,” said Mrs. Bradley, “I want you, Pat, to pretend that you received that note immediately upon your arrival here, and are going to keep the appointment. Inspector, you are Lillie Fletcher. Give us three seconds, Ferdinand, and then carry on.”

The little procession, followed almost immediately by the witnesses, filed out by way of the Emergency Exit.

“What exactly are you after?” asked Stallard.

“All my life,” Mrs. Bradley replied, “I’ve been longing to assault the police. Now is my chance, it seems. Off you go. You are Lillie Fletcher, going to keep your appointment at the Auxiliary Fire Station. No torches, anybody, please. Now, Inspector, keep your ears open. Pat is going to follow you. The minute she comes along, grab her.”

She herself mounted the cairn of stones. There was silence except for the sound of the inspector’s feet moving across the open yard to the gate.

“Look out, Inspector!” cried Mrs. Bradley suddenly. The inspector who had reached the gate, stepped sideways and clutched a woman in his arms.

“Torches!” said Mrs. Bradley. Stallard looked at his prisoner, and gave a shout of surprise.

“It’s the right height, but it isn’t Pat!” he said.

“No. It is the captain of the local Girl Guides, who kindly volunteered to come and help us. She has nothing to do with the case, except that you thought she was Pat. Or didn’t you?”

• 2 •

“But how did you hit on it, Mother?” demanded Ferdinand.

“The murder of Miss Platt was the keynote,” said Mrs. Bradley, “and was the most interesting of the deaths. There seemed no motive. That was what particularly fascinated me. That was why I went to so much trouble to find out who the dead woman was.”

“Oh, yes, the night-gown business.”

“As soon as identity was established the obvious suspect was Mrs. Platt, of course, but I could not believe it of her. Psychologically—the acid test!—it was wrong.

“Then I began to consider the other two deaths, for it was odd that three persons should be killed in the same town within the same twelve hours. It seemed to me that one or both might prove to be accidental. Then Pat began to give herself away—her ambitions, her fears, her lies—and looking closely at these indications of an unbalanced mind I saw the unwitting cause of the death of Councillor Smith.”

“It seems to me that you leapt to conclusions there,” said Ferdinand.

“I don’t know about that,” replied his mother. “The only likely person otherwise was Mrs. Platt, owing to that muddle about the time she got in that night. Now, supposing Pat to have been an eye-witness to the murder of Miss Platt—as Burt certainly thought she was—it seemed likely that Burt should have tried to make away with her. He sent the note to her lodgings, but, as it happened, Pat was engaged in conveying Councillor Smith’s body from the Report Centre yard into which he had turned when he felt so terribly ill, to the shelter of the nearest doorway, and did not return to her

lodgings before she reported for duty. Councillor Smith's desire for that free drink had kept him late."

"One thing I don't understand," said Ferdinand. "When Burt discovered that he had killed the wrong girl, why didn't he have another go at Pat?"

"Perhaps he was afraid, but I am inclined to think that Burt, who really does not lack intelligence and has led me quite a dance, all things considered, came to the conclusion when he read those articles in the paper, that Pat's interests were identical with his own—that it was paying her, in fact, to keep her knowledge secret."

"And Pat, of course, had no such knowledge, really. Rather ironical, when one comes to think that poor Lillie Fletcher was murdered because of this supposed but nonexistent knowledge. But how did you know that the murder took place at the gate and not on the rockery, Mother?"

"By the position of the body. It had been laid there. Nobody could have fallen in the attitude in which Lillie Fletcher was found. I put the point to your friend Mr. Arthur, who saw the body in position, and he agreed with me. Burt thought that the rain that night would wash away all traces of the deed from the place where it was committed, and, of course, it did.

"The most significant point, however, and the one which made me certain that Lillie was not the intended victim, was the fact that she did not expect to be on duty that night. When I heard that it clinched matters."

"So that any girl might have been murdered who stepped across the courtyard that night?"

"If she was about Pat's height. But why should anybody leave the Report Centre by those gates? It was a most unlikely thing. It could only have been Pat or Lillie."

"Yet he must have had some sort of light."

"He may have flashed a torch on her, but, remember, there is no reason to suppose that he knew Lillie Fletcher by sight. He was expecting Pat, and on that expectation he struck the tall girl who appeared."

"Yes, I see. Well, never mind Burt for the moment. He's safely jugged. But what are you doing about Pat?"

"Nothing, child. I have given the inspector the facts. He can arrest her if he likes, but I don't see how anything can be proved against her, unless you can trace the arsenic to her. Besides. She didn't mean to kill him."

“No, I suppose not. No. Melchior or Elvira Blackburn would be the only safe bet for a conviction.”

“Or Mrs. Commy-Platt,” said Mrs. Bradley.

“Mrs. Commy-Platt?”

“She had proposed to Councillor Smith that they should marry, and he had refused to entertain the notion. Although, she now declares he had changed his mind she couldn’t prove it. Any capable prosecutor ought to be able to make the jury remember that there is no fury like a woman scorned!”

“But, Mother, don’t you think it’s much more likely it was Mrs. Commy-Platt? And she had exactly the same opportunity as Pat. They were there together at the ‘Rat and Cow-catcher.’”

“Then who stood the body in the doorway? Who followed me to the meeting of the Sons of God Macedonian? Why was Pat late at the Report Centre?”

“But, Mother, surely, if Pat had wanted to poison somebody just for publicity purposes, she wouldn’t have chosen Smith? What about Mrs. Platt herself?”

“Pat wanted to use the arsenic she had taken from Mr. Fletcher’s shed. She had to find a vehicle for it. Stout was better than port. I think perhaps Mrs. Platt’s glass of port may have saved her. But, child, there’s proof against Pat of the most extraordinary kind.”

“Do I know it?”

“Well, you should do. Do you remember, when Sally gave us her detailed account of all that had happened at the Report Centre she mentioned that Pat had suggested they should cover up the traces of Lillie Fletcher’s vomit with sand?”

“Yes. Oh, of course, yes, I see. I suppose Lillie Fletcher hadn’t been sick at all. It was all a fabrication on Pat’s part. But why should she try to draw attention to arsenic which wasn’t there? I can’t see any point in it.”

“Neither could I, at first. But do you also remember that Sally told us she missed Pat for a minute or two, and that Pat blamed the black-out for their having lost track of one another?”

“Yes, I remember that, too. But, Mother, I thought that vomit was analysed, and that it did return arsenic, although not in a fatal dose. Oh, but, of course! The autopsy!”

“Yes, that’s my proof against Pat. It was Councillor Smith who was sick in the Town Hall yard, not Lillie Fletcher. Lillie had taken no arsenic.”

“By Jove, you’ve hit it, Mother! And she wanted to cover her track! Why on earth didn’t she do it without help, though? Why broadcast what she was doing?”

“Safer. Very much safer. She knew that nothing could be traced to her from Lillie Fletcher. Besides, she had not read Burt’s anonymous note (he seems good at notes, by the way; he trapped Tom Talby; remember?) and so her feeling of guilt so far as the Report Centre was concerned, was connected with Smith, whom she had led there earlier. She was terrified, however, when Councillor Smith died in the yard there. She wanted to cover up the fact that he had been present there lest suspicion be aroused and an enquiry started whose course she could not foretell.”

“Do you think that Stallard will arrest her?”

“I don’t know, child. She’s not likely, now her ambitions are realised, to play such a dangerous trick again, and there’s poetic justice in Smith’s death, since he was chairman of the Committee which refused her a grant for her college course, you know.”

“You are saying that Smith arranged his own murder by that bit of cheeseparing, Mother, and that the girl had a motive for killing him? It seems to me, you’re building a pretty case against her.”

“A house of cards,” said Mrs. Bradley, “and it would collapse at one good deep breath blown at it by a defending counsel. You yourself, if you were appearing for the girl, would demolish it in an instant. You know, you would.”

“Ah, yes, but I shouldn’t be called. I wouldn’t defend in a case where I believed the prisoner to be guilty.”

“There’s a good boy,” said his mother, grinning.

“Well, I wouldn’t have your moral sense,” retorted Ferdinand, taking her arm to lead her into the house as Lady Selina, tin-hatted, appeared on the terrace.

“Well, well, all war-time morals are probably very strange things,” said Mrs. Bradley. “And the morals of people like Mrs. Platt and Councillor Smith are probably stranger than mine.”

“But, Mother, you can’t behave like God and decide that Burt shall be arrested and Pat get off scot-free.”

“How do you know how God behaves?” asked his mother.

About the Author

Gladys Mitchell was born in the village of Cowley, Oxford, in April 1901. She was educated at the Rothschild School in Brentford, the Green School in Isleworth, and at Goldsmiths and University Colleges in London. For many years Miss Mitchell taught history and English, swimming, and games. She retired from this work in 1950 but became so bored without the constant stimulus and irritation of teaching that she accepted a post at the Matthew Arnold School in Staines, where she taught English and history, wrote the annual school play, and coached hurdling. She was a member of the Detection Club, the PEN, the Middlesex Education Society, and the British Olympic Association. Her father's family are Scots, and a Scottish influence has appeared in some of her books.